

Procedures

Fat Transfer

What are the issues?

The transfer of fat to fill out hollow areas can be an extremely effective technique. It can either be used alone or, more commonly, in combination with other procedures. Sometimes called 'lipofilling' or 'Coleman fat transfer', after the surgeon who popularised the technique, it is finding increasing application in facial aesthetic surgery where it can add volume to the cheeks. It is also used in reconstructive surgery where some types of scars may be improved and lost tissue volume may be replaced.

As we age, the fat in our cheeks descends and reduces in volume, both of which can affect our appearance. The replacement of this fat can go some way to counteract the negative effects on appearance. Alternatively, if there is a loss of volume in a particular area of the body, following injury for example, or following removal of a breast lump or other similar surgery, fat transfer can restore this volume and the normal contour.

What can the procedure achieve?

Autologous fat transfer restores lost volume where tissues have thinned through age. It can also be used to replace tissues that have been lost through surgery or injury. There is also emerging evidence that the overlying skin can benefit from the new fat grafts, possibly resulting from the presence of 'stem' cells within the transferred fat. Further research is needed before this is fully understood. In the face, the most common area to be treated is the cheeks, which can become hollowed with age.

What does the procedure involve?

An area where fat can safely be removed is first identified, usually around the abdomen or hip region. The fat is first infused with a saline solution to loosen the tissues before a small cannula aspirates the fat cells into a syringe. This fat is then concentrated using a centrifuge and the purified sample is injected into the area of volume loss using a fine needle with a blunt tip. The surgery is usually performed under general anaesthetic but patients may return home later the same day if small areas are being treated.

What is right for me?

Autologous fat transfer is a good technique to replace lost volume and is most successful for small defects. Although there may be some loss of the fat grafts, modern techniques allow most to survive. If you are considering facial aesthetic surgery, you may wish to discuss the technique with your surgeon to see how it may help you achieve the outcome you desire.

What are the limitations?

The fat cells transferred from one part of the body to another are known as 'grafts'. This means that they will only survive in their new location if they receive an appropriate blood supply for nutrition. New blood vessels will grow into the fat grafts during the healing process. However the speed this occurs limits how much fat can be transferred at any one time. Your surgeon will discuss this with you in more detail because it depends upon the area to be treated. Some of the fat grafts may not survive and the overall volume restoration may be less than was first hoped. You may require more than one treatment to achieve the desired effect.

What are the risks?

Some of the fat that has been transferred may not survive. This will mean the volume enhancement may prove less than expected. Although this is unpredictable, the modern approach to fat transfer means this happens less frequently.

Some of the transferred fat may turn to scar tissue which can sometimes be felt under the skin as nodular areas. These usually soften as time passes and rarely require any further treatment.

Any form of surgery can result in temporary bruising and swelling. In fat grafting procedures, this may be seen either at the donor site where the fat is harvested or at the recipient site where it is placed.

Significant bleeding and infection are rarely seen and the resulting scars are tiny and usually very well hidden.

What can I expect afterwards?

Swelling and bruising

It may take a month or two for the swelling to settle completely although any bruises will settle much more quickly.

Pain and numbness

Autologous fat transfer is not an unduly painful procedure and simple painkillers for a few days are usually all that is necessary. The skin overlying the fat grafts may feel a little strange for a few days but this will recover as healing progresses.

Dressings and sutures

Sutures are often used to close the sites where the fat was harvested. However, these may be dissolving and do not require removal. The small puncture marks where the fat was injected can often be closed with paper steristrips. Formal dressings are rarely required.

Scars

You will have very small scars at the site where the fat was removed and also where it was placed. Your surgeon will position these scars carefully to ensure they are as hidden as possible.

Getting back to normal

You are unlikely to need to take more than a week off work to recover from minor fat transfers. However for larger areas, or when the procedure is combined with other surgery, you may need longer.

Contact Us

For information and appointments please contact us and we will be happy to help.

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