

## Cosmetic surgery - dermabrasion

Dermabrasion is a procedure that is used to smooth fine wrinkles and scars left by acne or previous surgery. It involves controlled surgical sanding that 'refinishes' the top layers of the skin to give a smoother appearance. Dermabrasion can be performed over the full surface of the face or on small areas and may be done in conjunction with other cosmetic procedures such as a facelift or face peel.

Like other resurfacing procedures, dermabrasion is not an appropriate treatment for some people. People with dark or freckled skin or those prone to skin reactions are advised to avoid this form of treatment.

Dermabrasion is less commonly performed nowadays due to the rise of newer technologies, such as resurfacing lasers. However, in certain circumstances, it can be a valuable resurfacing technique.

### Conditions treated by dermabrasion

Dermabrasion is used to treat a range of skin complaints including:

- Facial scars (excluding burn scars)
- Scarring from prior surgery
- Wrinkles and frown lines
- Pre-cancerous skin growths (keratoses)
- Pigmentation
- Sun damage
- Tattoos
- Age (liver) spots.

### Things to consider

When making a decision about any procedure to enhance or alter your physical appearance, there are some important issues to keep in mind:

- Choose an appropriately qualified surgeon. Ask them about their training and experience in performing the procedure.
- Inform yourself fully of the possible risks, side effects and complications of the procedure.
- Think carefully about your expectations. Cosmetic treatments may improve your appearance and self-confidence, but they won't necessarily deliver your 'ideal' body image or change your life.
- Don't be swayed by advertisements that promise amazing results – if they sound too good to be true, they probably are.
- Think about the impact on your financial situation, as cosmetic surgery does not usually qualify for rebates from Medicare or private health insurance companies.
- You should have a 'cooling off' period after attending your first consultation. This will give you time to think about your decisions.

Don't be shy about asking questions and discussing any concerns with your plastic surgeon. Make sure you get a full explanation of the anticipated results and what you can expect after the procedure. If you are unsure, seek a second opinion before going ahead.

### Medical issues

Before the procedure, you need to discuss a range of medical issues with your doctor or surgeon including:

- **Physical examination** – this is important to make sure your skin is suitable for the treatment.

- **Medical history** – including any prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, herbs or vitamin or mineral supplements you may be taking. Some preparations can interact with surgical medications and need to be avoided.
- **Smoking history** – smokers are recommended to stop two weeks before surgery, because smoking decreases blood circulation in the skin and slows the healing process.
- **Bleeding risk** – aspirin and other medications that reduce blood clotting should be avoided before surgery.

### **Some people should avoid dermabrasion**

Like other resurfacing procedures, dermabrasion is not an appropriate treatment for some groups of people. These include:

- **Asian or dark-skinned people** – who may experience permanent discolouration and blotchiness.
- **People with freckled skin** – who should avoid dermabrasion over small areas, because their freckles will disappear in the treated areas only.
- **People who develop allergic rashes or other skin reactions** – who are also advised against undergoing dermabrasion.

### **The procedure**

Dermabrasion usually takes up to 90 minutes to perform, depending on the amount of skin to be treated. The procedure may need to be performed in stages, particularly when the scarring is deep or a large area of skin is involved.

- You will be given medications to help you relax.
- The area to be treated is wiped over with antiseptic lotion to reduce the risks of infection and then sprayed with anaesthetic.
- Injections of anaesthesia may also be administered. The procedure may be done under local or general anaesthesia.
- During the procedure, the surgeon sands away the outermost layer of the skin using a rough wire brush or a burr containing diamond particles. The sanding continues until an appropriate depth is reached that will make the wrinkle or scar less visible.
- Once the sanding is finished, the skin is treated and a dressing applied. The skin will be swollen and red.

### **Immediately after the treatment**

After the procedure, you can expect:

- Pain
- Red and swollen skin
- Inflammation and swelling that makes talking or eating painful – the swelling will last about one week
- A scab forms over the treated area as the skin begins to heal. Underneath the scab, new skin forms which is pink in colour and sensitive
- You will need to wear a dressing if you have had a large area of skin treated. Small areas of treated skin are generally left exposed to the air
- Depending on your circumstances, you can return home the same day or you may have a brief hospital stay.

### **Possible complications**

The greater the amount of skin removed, the higher the risk of complications. Some of the possible complications of dermabrasion include:

- Whiteheads – these can develop over the treated area and may need to be surgically removed
- Enlargement of the pores over the treated area – some people experience this but pores usually return to normal size once the swelling has subsided
- Infection of the treated area
- Scarring
- Change in skin colour – may be darker or lighter
- Change in skin texture – may be unnaturally smooth
- Excessive, uncontrolled scarring (keloid or hypertrophic scars).

## Taking care of yourself at home

Be guided by your doctor or surgeon, but general suggestions include:

- For two weeks, avoid any activities that may cause a bump to the face.
- Avoid active sports for about six weeks.
- You can return to work one week to 10 days after the procedure.
- It is essential that you avoid exposure to direct sunlight, because dermabrasion strips the skin of its protective layer of pigmentation. Always wear sunblock when going outdoors.

## Long-term outlook

The pinkness of the skin takes approximately three months to fade. Some patients choose to wear non-allergenic makeup during this time to camouflage the appearance of their skin. It may take between six and 12 months before skin pigmentation returns completely, so sun exposure must be strictly avoided.

## Other forms of treatment

Chemical peel is a similar technique to dermabrasion, but the skin layers are removed chemically instead of mechanically. A solution is wiped over the face, which is then left uncovered or masked with lotion or tape. The chemicals burn the skin and the healing process promotes new growth. Deep burns remove the most wrinkles, but also increase the risk of complications such as scarring and infection.

Resurfacing lasers and fractionated lasers have largely taken over from dermabrasion. Resurfacing laser also remove the outer layers of the skin, while the fractionated lasers do the same but leave some of the skin intact for more rapid healing.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Plastic surgeon
- Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons Tel. 1300 367 446

## Things to remember

- Dermabrasion is a procedure that is used to smooth fine wrinkles and scars left by acne or previous surgery.
- It involves controlled surgical sanding that 'refinishes' the top layers of the skin to give a smoother appearance.
- Dermabrasion may remove the skin's pigmentation, so it is essential to avoid sun exposure for around six to 12 months after undergoing the procedure.

## This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons

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