



# Free flap surgery

Knowing your  
options and  
what to expect



**Head & Neck**

Surgical Cancer Specialists  
of SW Florida

Part of the **GenesisCare** network

# Surgical techniques

Surgery is a common approach for addressing head and neck cancers. While it can be highly successful when tumors are localized, surgical procedures typically entail the excision of skin and adjacent tissues. This process may result in the formation of wounds that are too large, and the tissue removed with the cancer must be replaced. This reconstructive process may involve a surgical technique referred to as free flap surgery.

## What is a free flap?

A free flap is when tissue is taken from one part of the body and then transplanted to another part of the body to fill a soft tissue and/or bony defect created from the cancer resection. Small arteries and veins are microscopically sutured back together to provide blood going into and out of the transplanted tissue. Due to this, one of the potential complications of the surgery is a clot forming in the artery or vein leading to loss of the free flap. For this reason, special techniques are used to monitor the flap including an implantable doppler.

# Free flap surgery options

The type of free flap surgery that your surgeon recommends will depend upon multiple factors, including the area of the wound and your individual needs and preferences. Types of free flap surgeries include:

## Radial forearm free flap

This procedure involves taking tissue from your forearm to reconstruct damaged areas, such as the mouth or throat. The flap includes skin, fat and blood vessels which are meticulously connected to the recipient site.

## Anterolateral thigh free flap

In this procedure, tissue from your thigh is used to reconstruct areas like the head, neck or upper chest. The flap consists of skin, fat and blood vessels that are transplanted and reconnected to restore form and function.

## Fibula free flap

The fibula free flap utilizes a segment of your fibula (calf bone) to reconstruct areas like the jaw or lower extremities. The bone, along with its blood vessels, is transferred and reattached for structural support.

# After surgery

After surgery, you will wake up in the recovery room. You'll spend about five days in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for close monitoring and initial recovery. You will be frequently monitored by a nurse who will watch your vitals (pulse rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, etc.), transplanted tissue and help manage any pain that you might have.

You will remain in the hospital for approximately two weeks to ensure proper healing, pain management and to address any post-surgery concerns.

You may have a tracheostomy inserted during surgery which is a temporary breathing tube inserted through a small incision in your neck to assist with breathing while you heal. Your medical team will monitor and care for the tracheostomy site.

You also may notice multiple drains placed near the surgical site to help remove excess fluids and prevent complications. These will be removed when drainage reduces to an appropriate level.

You will have nothing to eat or drink after the procedure for about 10 to 14 days to allow for healing. During this time, all medications and nutrients are given through a feeding tube placed in the nose (NG) or directly into the stomach (G-tube). This is a temporary measure that will be removed once you are healed and can eat and drink normally.

In addition, a wound vacuum assisted closure (wound vac) may be applied to enhance wound healing. This uses negative pressure to promote tissue growth and reduce infection risk.



# Recovery tips



Follow medical instructions for wound care, hygiene and medication management. Participate in prescribed physical therapy to aid mobility and function.



Communicate any discomfort, pain or concerns to your medical team promptly.



Maintain a balanced diet and stay hydrated to support healing.



Stay positive and reach out to friends, family and support groups for emotional encouragement.



Your medical team will provide personalized guidance throughout your recovery journey. Remember that each patient's experience may vary, and your progress will be closely monitored to ensure the best possible outcome.

# Contact us

For more information, visit our website at: [genesiscareus.com](https://genesiscareus.com)



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0222\_D\_02.2025