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The Royal Liverpool
and Broadgreen
University Hospitals
NHS Trust

Patient information

Nipple-areola Tattoo

Breast Services

What is a nipple-areola tattoo?

Nipple tattoo is the implantation of small amounts of pigment (dye) into the skin to create the colour of the nipple and areola (the brown or pink area around the nipple).

This is usually performed in patients who have had a breast reconstruction and after the nipple itself has been reconstructed by a small operation – (see leaflet: nipple reconstruction).

The procedure is performed by a specially trained doctor or nurse who, with your choice and preferences, matches the colour by eye. It is important to note that it is not possible to get a 100% colour match with the other nipple. The colour is also likely to change over time. The colour will often lighten and patients may need top up treatments to achieve and maintain the desired colour.

What are the benefits of having a nipple-areola tattoo?

The aim of nipple-areola tattoo is to give you a colour match for your reconstructed nipple-areola that is as realistic as possible. We aim to match it to your remaining nipple or for double mastectomy, to your choice of colour.

What are the risks, complications and considerations of having a nipple-areola tattoo?

- Bleeding - as with any procedure that punctures the skin.
- Infection - this can be treated with antibiotics.
- Scarring of the area if the scab doesn't heal properly.
- Allergy to the pigment and/or local anaesthetic (a patch test can be carried out).
- The colour may not be a perfect match.
- Colour spreading from the original position.
- Fading of the colour over time.
- Uneven pigment colour over the areola.

If you are worried about any of these risks, please speak to your Consultant or a member of their team.

Are there any alternatives available?

Yes, you could decide to have a prosthetic (false) nipple-areola.

What will happen if I decide not to have treatment?

Nothing. You can have a nipple-areola tattoo at a later date if you change your mind.

What sort of anaesthetic will be given to me?

Many women do not have any sensation in the area to be treated due to the previous reconstruction procedure and may not need local anaesthetic.

If you do have some sensation in this area then we can apply a local anaesthetic cream to numb the skin, but you remain awake.

Before the procedure

The procedure is carried out in the outpatient clinic and you can expect to be there for about two hours.

We will ask you for details of your medical history and medications.

This is a good opportunity for you to ask questions about the procedure, but please feel free to discuss any concerns you have at any time.

During the procedure

The pigment (colour) is applied to the skin using a pen-like device with small needles. The needles move up and down very fast, penetrating the outer and inner layers of the skin (the epidermis and dermis), implanting the coloured pigments.

The doctor or nurse holds the pen-like device and guides it along the skin to build up colour.

The length of time it takes to complete the procedure varies with each individual and also depends on the size of the area to be coloured. You should allow one hour for the procedure and one hour before if you decide to have local anaesthetic cream. Some people may be treated more quickly.

What should I expect after the procedure?

You may experience slight swelling and redness to the area following the procedure. These symptoms will subside within one to seven days.

A dressing will be applied over the area and you should keep it dry and intact for five days.

You should be able to resume normal activities following the procedure.

However we recommend that you do not swim, sunbathe / use sun beds, use a sauna or jacuzzi and avoid excessive perspiration for two weeks following the procedure to prevent pigment changes and allow the area to heal.

You may notice slight fading of the pigment and softening of the colour.

Factors that can affect the result

- Natural skin overtones.
- Individual skin characteristics.
- Individual healing ability.
- Excessive exposure to chlorine (e.g. swimming pool water).

- Excessive exposure to saltwater (e.g. sea water).
- Sunbathing/sun beds.
- Excessive use of soap.
- Removal of scab.
- Smoking.

Going Home

You will be able to leave hospital as soon as the treatment is over.

Skin care instructions after the procedure

The following instructions must be followed for at least two weeks after the procedure to ensure successful results.

- Before bathing or showering, apply a light coating of Vaseline (or similar petroleum jelly) with a cotton bud to the areola. This is to repel the water from the area.
- Cover the areola with a protective dressing during the day, uncover it while sleeping, but do not sleep on your stomach. This protects the tissues and helps healing.
- If a crust/scab appears, do not pick or peel it off as this may remove the pigment as well as the crust/scab.
- To prevent infection, try not to touch the coloured area with your fingers until it is completely healed.

Pain relief and medication

Many patients do not need any pain relief following the procedure, but simple painkillers that you can buy in the pharmacy should be enough.

Returning to work

It is probably wise to have the rest of the day off, but you should be able to go to work the following day.

Further Appointments

You will be given an appointment to come back to a follow up clinic. At this time we can check your progress and discuss with you any further treatment we recommend.

You may need further sessions in the future, as over a period of time the area may fade. This can be arranged by contacting the Breast Care Team.

Further information

Breast Unit Reception

Tel: 0151 706 2920

Text phone number: 18001 0151706 2920

Breast Care Nurses

Tel: 0151 706 2927 (24hr answer machine)

Text phone number: 18001 0151 706 2927

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