

Areola micropigmentation

Introduction

In this information sheet we explain some of the aims, benefits, risks and alternatives for patients undergoing areola micropigmentation. Please ask about anything you do not fully understand or wish to have explained in more detail.

What is micropigmentation?

It is a type of semi-permanent colour (cosmetic tattoo) applied to the skin of your breast to recreate the colour and shape of the nipple areola after breast reconstruction.

How is the micropigmentation carried out?

A trained and experienced practitioner will perform the procedure, usually in an outpatient clinic. Depending on the sensitivity of the reconstructed breast tissue, you may be offered a topical anaesthetic (in the form of a cream, which is applied at least 30 minutes before the procedure is carried out) to numb the area.

What are the benefits and risks?

You will be involved in choosing the colour match of your nipple in consultation with your micropigmentation practitioner. We aim to find as realistic a colour match for your nipple areola as possible and will try to match it to your remaining nipple (if you have had a double mastectomy, you will be able to choose the colour).

However, micropigmentation is an invasive procedure and is not without risk. The main risks include:

- Not achieving an exact colour match
- Fading of colour over time
- Scarring
- Pigment migration or spreading
- Uneven pigment colour
- Slight skin irritation

Is there an alternative?

You can choose not to have micropigmentation; it is purely for cosmetic reasons.

How many treatments will I need and how permanent is it?

Some patients require more than one treatment. The tattoo will last for up to three years or longer, but this varies. Some patients require further follow up treatments every year to achieve and maintain the desired outcome.

100% success cannot always be guaranteed and the extent of the procedure depends on what changes are desired and the method the practitioner deems appropriate.

What factors may affect the results?

The results of micropigmentation is partially determined by variations in skin type, and can be affected by:

- Medication
- Natural skin tones
- Skin characteristics (dryness, oiliness, sun damage, thickness, colour)
- PH balance of the skin (acidity)
- Alcohol intake
- Smoking
- Individual healing ability
- Illness

If you have a heart condition, epilepsy, haemophilia or other clotting disorder, or if you have had hepatitis over the past 12 months, you must inform your practitioner before the procedure.

Allergy test

You will be offered a skin patch test 24 hours prior to the procedure. It is advisable to have the test if you have a history of any type of allergy. The purpose of this test is to detect allergies or other reactions to the topical anaesthetic and pigments used during the procedure. A full 24 hours is needed after the skin test to see if allergies occur.

Equipment

All equipment used is sterile. Disposable needles are used for each individual procedure and disposed of immediately after use.

What happens during the procedure?

The micropigmentation procedure usually takes 30-60 minutes, depending on individual requirements. Completion time varies according to:

- The position, width and depth of the nipple areola area
- The depth of colour to be matched
- Acceptance of the pigment to skin type

Depending on the sensitivity of the area, you may require a local anaesthetic for the procedure. This will be applied as a topical cream at least 30 minutes before the procedure. The pigment is applied using a pen-like device, which basically works like a miniature sewing machine: the needles move up and down really quickly, penetrating the outer and inner layers (epidermis and dermis) of the skin, implanting the coloured pigment. The practitioner holds the machine with a steady hand while guiding it along the skin. The speed and power can be controlled by a foot switch or pedal. The pigments are built up using dots, lines and/or a circular motion.

What should you expect after the procedure?

You will experience slight swelling and redness following the procedure and the skin may feel 'tight'. These symptoms will subside within 1-7 days depending on how sensitive your skin is.

You should be able to resume normal activities immediately following the procedure; however, use of cosmetics, excessive perspiration and exposure of the affected area to the sun should be avoided until the area is fully healed.

Also, if you swim or the area is in contact with chlorine or saltwater during the healing phase, the pigment is at risk of bleaching.

Over the initial few days, the pigmented area of skin will form a scab. This will last for 14-21 days, when exfoliation of the dead cells (the scab) will occur as healing takes place. You will then notice slight fading of the pigment and softening of the colour.

It is important that the healing process takes its natural course. Scarring can occur if the scabs are removed or knocked off prematurely.

UV protective swimwear and cream should be worn whilst you are on holiday, and due to difficulty in colour matching, we will not do the tattoo on tanned skin but would wait for the tan to fade and for the skin to return to its natural colour.

Skin care instructions

The following instructions must be carefully followed for at least two weeks after the procedure to ensure pigment retention, prevention of infection and successful results.

- Leave the initial protective dressing in place for 24-48 hrs after the procedure.
- Before showering or bathing, apply a light coating of Vaseline to the areola using a cotton bud. This protects the area by enabling the water to bead off the damaged tissue.
- Cover the areola with a protective dressing during the day, uncover the area whilst sleeping, but do not sleep on your stomach. This protects the tissue and promotes healing.
- If a crust appears on the areola, do not pick or peel it off, as this would remove the pigment as well as the crust.
- Do not use soap, sunbathe, swim, sauna or Jacuzzi during the two weeks following both the initial and follow up procedures.

- To prevent infection, do not touch the pigmented area with your fingers until it is completely healed. Use cotton buds to apply ointments.

Contact us

Breast Clinical Admin Team (CAT 3) on 0118 322 1883 or email rbb-tr.cat3@nhs.net.

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More information

If you have any questions about the procedure or this information, please speak to your doctor or nurse.

Breast Cancer Care

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More information is available on the Trust website www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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