

Patient information factsheet

Nipple and areola micropigmentation

This factsheet contains information about nipple and areola micropigmentation. It explains what nipple and areola micropigmentation is, what the procedure involves and the benefits and risks. We hope it helps to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us using the details at the end of this factsheet.

What is nipple and areola micropigmentation?

Micropigmentation (also known as tattooing) is a non-surgical procedure that involves implanting semi-permanent, natural pigment (ink) via a needle into the surface layer of the skin to give colour. It can safely be performed on various locations on the head and body, including on the face, scalp and breasts.

Nipple and areola micropigmentation involves implanting colour to the nipple and areola (darker area of skin surrounding the nipple) via a small, electronic machine containing a cluster of fine needles. The procedure is usually offered to people who have had breast reconstruction to help recreate the appearance of their natural nipple and areola.

The procedure is usually performed in the outpatient department by a trained consultant or breast clinical nurse specialist (CNS).

Why have I been offered nipple and areola micropigmentation?

We offer nipple and areola micropigmentation (tattooing) to:

- patients who have had nipple reconstruction (a surgical procedure to rebuild, reshape or add the appearance of a nipple to the breast) – You will need to wait at least **three** months before you can safely have micropigmentation if you have had nipple reconstruction.
- patients who do not wish to have a reconstruction procedure after losing their nipple but who would like to create the appearance of a nipple (similar to a '3D' tattoo) – You will need to wait at least **six** months before it is safe for you to have micropigmentation if you have had:
 - breast reconstruction
 - breast-conserving surgery
 - radiotherapy

Your doctor or breast CNS will explain to you in more detail why they have offered you this procedure and what your options are. If you have any questions or would like to see some photograph examples of nipple and areola tattoos, please ask us.

What are the benefits of nipple and areola micropigmentation?

The aim of nipple and areola micropigmentation is to help improve the aesthetic appearance (look) of the breast after reconstruction. This can help to:

- improve body image
- boost self-esteem

What are the risks of nipple and areola micropigmentation?

Tattoo satisfaction

As with all cosmetic procedures, 100% satisfaction cannot be guaranteed. How happy you are with the finished tattoo will depend on a number of factors, including:

- your expectations
- your skin type
- the pigment match (how close we can match the colour of the pigment to your natural nipple and areola colour)
- the micropigmentation method used (this can vary depending on your specific circumstances and which healthcare professional performs your procedure)

We use a semi-permanent ink for this procedure. This ink is safe to use following breast and nipple reconstruction, but it will fade over time (usually after two or three years).

It is important that you are aware that:

- we may not be able to achieve an exact match of your natural nipple and areola
- there may be an uneven take up of pigment (this can cause the tattoo to appear patchy or inconsistent)
- your skin may not retain (hold on to) the pigment or it may reject some pigment colours

Risks

Although micropigmentation is a safe procedure, it is not without risk.

Risks can include:

- discomfort during the procedure
- allergic reaction to the pigment
- bleeding
- infection
- scarring
- flattening of the reconstructed nipple
- breast implant damage

We will explain all of these risks to you in more detail before your procedure.

What factors can affect the results?

A number of factors can affect the appearance of the tattooed nipple and areola, including:

- natural skin tone colour
- skin type (for example, if you have dry, oily or sun-damaged skin)
- certain medications
- lifestyle choices (for example, drinking alcohol, smoking, swimming, or using a sauna or jacuzzi)
- personal healing ability
- the presence of any scars or stretch marks around the nipple or areola area

Are there any alternatives to micropigmentation?

There are no alternatives that will achieve the same look as micropigmentation. However, there is the option of wearing a self-adhesive (stick-on) nipple prosthesis. Nipple prostheses come in different sizes and colours and are usually made from silicone. Your surgeon will have discussed all your options with you in more detail.

How should I prepare for the procedure?

We will arrange a clinic appointment for you before your procedure.

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At this appointment, we will:

- explain the procedure to you in detail (including the benefits and risks)
- perform patch testing on your skin
- check your skin sensitivity
- work with you to choose pigment colours
- answer any questions you may have

Patch testing

A patch test involves adding a small amount of pigment to your skin in an area that isn't easily seen, such as the back of your shoulder or behind your ear, to see if you have a reaction to it. The pigment patch will need to stay on your skin for a minimum of 24 hours. If you experience a reaction to the pigment (for example, a rash or swelling), please contact us using the details at the end of this factsheet.

Skin sensitivity

Loss of sensation in the breast is a common side effect after having breast reconstruction. This means that many people who have had breast reconstruction will not experience any pain while having the micropigmentation procedure. However, this is not the case for everyone. To check what sensation you can feel in your reconstructed breast, we will use a small needle to check the area. If you can feel the needle at any point, please let us know.

If you have sensation in your breast, we advise purchasing a local anaesthetic (numbing) cream from your local pharmacy (we recommend **Emla cream**). You should apply the numbing cream to the area that is going to be treated **one hour** before your procedure and then cover it with a waterproof dressing.

What will happen on the day of the procedure?

On the day of your procedure, we will:

- go through your medical history with you
- check if you have any allergies
- answer any questions you may have
- ask you if you are happy to go ahead with the procedure (this is known as taking verbal consent and we will document this in your medical records)
- offer you a hospital gown to wear

We will then discuss the size and shape of the area to be tattooed with you. Once we have agreed on the size and shape, we will mark the area on your breast with a pen. We will give you a mirror to hold so that you can see the drawn nipple and areola. If you would like any changes, please tell us. It is important that you are completely happy with the size, shape and position of the nipple and areola. Once you are happy, we will begin the micropigmentation procedure.

We will ask you to lie on your back with your head slightly raised. We will then apply two to three layers of pigment to your breast using the micropigmentation machine. Please note that the needles used in the machine are sterile and are used once for each individual procedure and then disposed of immediately.

We may ask to take photographs of your tattooed nipple and areola as part of your medical record. If you are happy for us to take photographs, we will ask you to sign a consent form after your procedure.

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Once the procedure is complete, we will apply a layer of petroleum jelly (usually Vaseline) over the tattoo. We will then place a small dressing on top of this. You will then be able to go home.

Before you leave hospital, we will advise you how to care for the tattooed area. We will also give you a separate aftercare advice factsheet with more information.

How long will the procedure take?

The length of the procedure will vary depending on what you are having done. However, each nipple or areola usually takes up to one hour to tattoo. Please ensure you allow enough time for this appointment.

What follow-up care will I receive?

Most people will need a minimum of two micropigmentation appointments.

We will arrange a follow-up face-to-face appointment for you six weeks after your first micropigmentation appointment.

At this appointment, we will:

- check how well your tattoo is healing
- assess whether any additional pigment is needed
- top up your tattoo with more pigment (if necessary)

Your nipple and/or areola tattoo will gradually fade over time (usually after two to three years). If the pigment has faded and you need a top-up, please ask your general practitioner (GP) to refer you back to our breast CNS team.

When should I seek urgent medical help?

Contact NHS 111 for advice immediately if you:

- feel unwell or have a high temperature (38°C or above)
- develop swelling, bruising, a rash or tenderness over the tattoo or surrounding area
- notice the tattoo feels hotter than the rest of your skin

In an emergency, go to your nearest emergency department.

Contact us

If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us.

For non-urgent queries

Breast clinical nurse specialists (CNS)

Telephone: **023 8120 3753** (Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm)

Please leave a voicemail with your name, hospital number and a brief reason for your call. We will aim to return your call by the next working day.

For urgent queries

Contact NHS 111 for advice.

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