

Axillary node clearance

As part of your breast cancer treatment, your surgeon has advised you to undergo an operation, under general anaesthetic, on the lymph glands or 'nodes'. These are small bean-shaped organs that lie along the lymph vessels that run through the body. This leaflet explains what happens during the surgery and outlines the possible risks of the procedure. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to your doctor or breast care nurse.

Axillary node clearance

This is the removal of lymph glands in your armpit. This technique is used in a number of situations:

- Where we (the patient and the clinician) have agreed it is best to carry out all your breast surgery during one operation.
- You have chosen to have an axillary node clearance as part of your staging procedure for your breast. The doctor will have discussed this with you beforehand.
- We have found cancer positive glands and have advised you to undergo clearance to remove the rest of the lymph glands.

The tissue removed is then sent off to the pathology laboratory to be analysed under the microscope.

Possible complications of axillary surgery

1. Thickened scar

Scar healing is unpredictable and although usually the scar heals up to a fine line, occasionally, the scar heals in a thickened fashion called a 'keloid' or 'hypertrophic' scar.

2. Infection

Infection occurs in about 1 in 20 patients, following this sort of procedure but if it occurs it can usually be treated with antibiotics. Occasionally, however, we may need to open the wound, drain out the infected fluid and then it may need to be packed, in which case it may take some weeks to heal.

3. Haematoma

Some bruising is inevitable after axillary node clearance. However, very occasionally blood collects in a lump underneath the wound (known as a haematoma) and this may need to be removed, either in the clinic or by a second operation.

4. Neuralgia/numbness and wound pain

In some cases patients may experience a condition called neuralgia which occurs when there is irritation or damage to a nerve. Symptoms of this may include increased

sensitivity to the skin along the path of the damaged nerve, so that any touch or pressure is felt as pain, numbness along the path of the nerve or a sharp, stabbing or burning pain, which can come and go. Other sensations patients may experience are pain, discomfort, altered sensations or numbness in or around the wound and axilla during or after the healing process. Usually these sensations will settle with painkillers but if the problem continues, we would recommend that you contact your General Practitioner. If necessary, he/she can then refer you back to see us if there is any ongoing problem.

5. Seroma

Seroma is fluid that collects beneath the wound and may need draining from time to time. This is a very simple procedure that can be done by the breast care nurse in the seroma clinic.

6. Shoulder stiffness

Shoulder exercises to carry out after your wounds have healed can help your mobility. Your breast care nurses can advise you on these.

7. Lymphoedema

This is a swelling that occurs in the tissue below the skin, caused by lymph fluid that cannot drain away. The symptoms of this include swelling or puffiness of the arm, hand or chest on the side you had surgery or sometimes feelings of tightness, firmness or heaviness. There are precautions that you need to take to prevent or lessen lymphoedema. These will be discussed with you by one of the breast care nurses. You can also get support from a lymphoedema specialist physiotherapy – ask your breast care nurse for more information.

Contact us

If you have any problems regarding your care or treatment at this hospital, please *Talk to us*. Please speak to a member of staff in the clinic or on the ward or if you would rather talk to a senior member of staff, ask to speak to the ward/departmental manager or matron. Or speak to the Patient Relations Team on: 0118 322 8338 or ask a member of staff, the receptionists or the switchboard to contact them.

Useful telephone numbers:

Sonning Ward 0118 322 8458

Pre-operative Assessment Clinic 0118 322 8532

Breast Care Nurses 0118 322 7420

More information

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

For more information about the Trust visit our website www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Breast Care Clinic, December 2005

Reviewed: December 2017

Review due: December 2019