

Axillary Node Clearance

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This fact sheet is for general information about this procedure only. It is not intended to be used as medical advice or to replace advice that your relevant healthcare professional would give you. If you have a particular medical problem, please consult a healthcare professional.

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What is breast cancer?

Breast cancer is a harmful growth that starts in the glandular tissue of your breast.

Lymph nodes (glands) are small structures which lie along lymph vessels present throughout your body. They help your body deal with infections, but they also become involved in the spread of some cancers.

What is an axillary node clearance?

Axillary node clearance is a procedure to remove all the lymph nodes from the affected armpit.

What are the benefits?

Some lymph nodes in your armpit may appear normal but contain cancer cells. Removing all of the lymph nodes in the armpit gives the best chance of clearing the cancer cells from this area.

The lymph nodes that your surgeon removes will be examined under a microscope to help decide on any further treatment.

Surgery will also help reduce the chance of the cancer cells spreading to other parts of the body.

Are there any alternatives?

Sometimes radiotherapy can be used to treat the lymph nodes in your armpit, instead of removing them.

Your breast-care team may not recommend this procedure, particularly if only a small number of cancer cells are found in the lymph nodes in your armpit.

What does the procedure involve?

The procedure is performed under a general anaesthetic and takes about 60 to 90 minutes. It may take a little longer if you have breast surgery at the same time.

Your surgeon will make a cut in your armpit. If you are having a procedure on your breast at the same time, your surgeon may be able to use the same cut.

Your surgeon will remove some or all of the nodes and surrounding fatty tissue in your armpit.

They will close the cut with stitches, sticky strips, clips or glue.

All of the lymph nodes and any breast tissue that your surgeon removed will be examined under a microscope. Your breast-care team will know the results 2 to 4 weeks later.

What complications can happen?

Possible complications of this procedure are shown below. Some may be serious and can even be life threatening.

General complications of any procedure

- Bleeding
- Infection of the surgical wound
- Allergic reaction to the equipment, materials or medication
- Venous thromboembolism
- Chest infection

Specific complications of this procedure

- Developing a lump under your wound caused by fluid collecting
- Developing a lump under your wound caused by blood collecting
- Skin necrosis, where some of the skin at the edge of your wound dies leaving a black area
- Stiff shoulder
- Numbness or continued pain around your armpit or the inner part of your arm
- Swelling of your arm, hand or breast
- Arm weakness
- Infection of the affected arm

Consequences of this procedure

- Pain
- Scarring of your skin, which may be unsightly

What happens after the procedure?

You should be able to go home the same day or the day after.

You should be able to build up to normal activities after 2 to 3 weeks.

Regular exercise should help you to return to normal activities as soon as possible. Before you

start exercising, ask the breast-care team or your GP for advice.

The breast-care team will arrange an appointment after the surgery. The lymph nodes and breast tissue that your surgeon removed will have been examined under a microscope. Your breast-care team will tell you the results and discuss with you any treatment or follow-up care you need.

Summary

The lymph nodes in your armpit can be affected by breast cancer. Axillary node clearance is a procedure to remove your lymph nodes to help treat the cancer and to prevent it from coming back in your armpit.

Keep this information document. Use it to help you if you need to talk to the healthcare team.

Some information, such as risk and complication statistics, is taken from global studies and/or databases. Please ask your surgeon or doctor for more information about the risks that are specific to you, and they may be able to tell you about any other suitable treatments options.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare team would give you.

Acknowledgements

Reviewer

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