

## Lymph Node Dissection

### What is a Lymph Node Dissection?

A Lymph Node Dissection or Clearance is the removal of a group of lymph nodes or glands from one area of the body. Usually the armpit, groin, or pelvis. Your surgeon will specify to you the area of your surgery.

During your operation, the surgeon will remove the lymph nodes from the affected armpit, groin, or other area along with some of the surrounding tissue. The aim is to remove the cancer cells present in your lymph nodes and the surrounding tissue.

### What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is a part of the body's immune system, which helps to fight infection.

The lymphatic system consists of vessels like veins, which carry the lymph fluid around the body to the lymph node groups.

These groups of lymph nodes or glands are situated in certain parts of the body, such as the neck, armpit, and groin. Each group of lymph nodes receive lymph fluid from a specific area of the body. They act like a filtration system. For instance, the nodes in the armpit receive the lymph fluid from all parts of your arm; after passing through these nodes, the lymph fluid enters the bloodstream. Sometimes cancer cells can break away from the original cancer. These cells are carried in the lymph fluid to the lymph nodes where they can grow which causes swelling of these nodes. This is how some cancers are spread.

### Pre-operative assessment

Before your surgery you will have a pre-operative assessment. This will include an electrocardiogram (ECG), blood tests and a blood pressure check. You will also receive instructions about where you will need to go on the day of your operation, when to stop eating and drinking prior to your admission and information on any tablets or medications.

### The operation

This operation is performed under a general anaesthetic. It will take about 2 to 3 hours. The lymph nodes and some surrounding tissues are removed through one incision (long cut). There are many



important nerves and vessels in this area, so your surgeon will take great care to prevent damage to them. Sometimes however, the nerves and vessels can be affected.

Your wound will have sutures (stitches), or clips and you will have one or two wound drains (tubing) near your operation site. These drains help to prevent fluid build-up under the skin and may be left in place when you go home for some time.

### **Post-operative care**

You will be carefully monitored on the ward for any side effects of your surgery or the general anaesthetic. You may experience some pain after your surgery. The nurses will give you pain relief as needed. Please tell the nursing team if you have any concerns so we can ensure your comfort and safety. You will be encouraged to become mobile around the ward. This can help to prevent any post-operative complications.

Your dressings and drains will be checked regularly. The drain will usually be removed when the fluid drainage has significantly decreased. If the fluid drainage continues, the drain will have to be left in for longer. Sometimes you will be allowed home with the drain still in place.

The surgeons will assess your progress on the daily ward round.

### **Possible complications**

**Bleeding:** If you have bleeding this can build up in the site of surgery, this is called a haematoma. You may need to go back to theatre for this to be removed. You may also need a blood transfusion.

**Seroma:** Sometimes a pocket of clear fluid can form causing a swelling at the site of your operation under your scar, which is called a seroma. It is caused by a build-up of lymph fluid. This can be painful or uncomfortable but usually the body will re-absorb this fluid over time. On some occasions this may need to be aspirated (drained).

**Infection:** As with all operations there can be risk of infection. If you notice your wound becomes red, tender, hot or swollen, or you have a raised temperature, please contact the hospital via the hotline.

**Scarring:** Initially this may become raised but should settle with time. Massaging with cream helps once it is healed. The area that is operated on may also feel 'empty' and may have an unnatural appearance.

**Lymphoedema:** Swelling of the closest limb can take place, this can be mild to severe, and you will need to tell your team if this is a problem for you, as Lymphoedema support can be made available to you.

**Injury to the nerves and vessels:** Whilst every effort is made to minimise damage to the nerves and vessels, there is a possibility that you may experience this. You may experience numbness or tingling in the area.

**Stiffness:** You may experience limited movement in the area where you had your surgery. As your wound heals this should improve. You may need to see a physiotherapist who will give you some exercises to help with your movement.



Wound healing problems and delayed wound healing: You may require repeated dressings until the wound heals.

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT)/pulmonary embolism: Every effort will be taken to avoid the risk of a DVT.

Recurrence of disease: This is unpredictable and can occur in the same area or other parts of the body. You will be taught how to examine yourself and you will also be closely monitored in the outpatient clinic.

Effects of cigarette smoking: Cigarette smoking is known to be associated with poor wound healing and, if you are a smoker, to give you the best chance of healing well you must stop smoking before surgery.

### **Planning for discharge:**

When you are ready to leave the hospital, you will get a follow up appointment or plan. If you are going home with a drain in place, we will ensure you have sufficient drain bottles and are familiar with the process of changing the drain bottle.

### **Follow-up care:**

After your operation, all the lymph nodes and tissues are sent to the laboratory for an examination under the microscope, these results are generally available two weeks after the operation. After discussion at the multi-disciplinary team meeting (MDM) your surgeon will discuss these results and a plan of your care with you.

### **Contact details.**

Skin Cancer Clinical Nurse Specialist 020 7811 8011

Plastic Surgery Nurse Specialist 020 7352 8171 ext 4345

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899 (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

