

**Information sheet: AXILLARY NODE CLEARANCE**

You have been recommended an axillary clearance as part of your surgical treatment for breast cancer. Under general anaesthesia the majority of lymph nodes under the arm (axilla) are removed. The operation usually lasts up to one hour and involves a stay in hospital of up to three days. The lymph nodes drain lymphatic fluid from the arm and breast and sometimes the breast cancer can spread to these lymph nodes. By removing the majority of these nodes it is possible to reduce the chance of any recurrence of the tumour under the arm and help plan what treatment you should have after surgery. When you wake up from surgery you will find a small plastic tube (drain) which takes tissue fluid away from under the wound and this will stay in place for three days and will be removed before you are discharged from hospital.

**Possible side effects of surgery**

**Bleeding/infection:** these can happen after any type of breast surgery and occur in approximately 5-10% of all patients. If you are at increased risk of developing a post-operative infection you may be given antibiotics to reduce your risk.

**Seroma:** this is a collection of fluid under the wound that can occur after the drain has been removed. If the collection is very large or painful it can be easily drained using a small needle by a member of the breast team.

**Pins & needles/numbness:** this can occur under the arm or in the upper arm after this operation. It usually starts with pins and needles then subsides leaving a numb area in the upper, inner arm. The area of numbness usually gets less with time but may not resolve completely.

**Shoulder stiffness:** your shoulder may become stiff and painful after the operation. By following the course of exercises that is provided the mobility will improve and usually return to normal.

**Lymphoedema:** this is a build up of tissue fluid after surgery and it can affect the breast or arm. Lymphoedema of the arm can occur any time after surgery but is most common in the first three years. It is thought to affect up to 20% of all women who have this operation but only around 5% to a significant degree. If picked up early it is usually very treatable.

Professor Gordon Wishart; Information Sheet: Axillary Node Clearance, May 2015

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