

Breast Surgery

Axillary Lymph Node Clearance

Information for patients



You have been recommended to have an axillary lymph node clearance. This is an operation to remove all the lymph nodes (sometimes called lymph glands) from your axilla (armpit).

This has been recommended as an important part of your cancer treatment, because some cancer cells from your breast have been found in the lymph nodes in your axilla. These cancer cells will have travelled in your lymphatic system (the tiny channels that connect all your lymph nodes) from the cancer in your breast to the lymph nodes in your axilla.

Before the operation

Your breast surgeon will explain the results, which have shown that there are breast cancer cells in the lymph nodes in your axilla. Your surgeon and Breast Nurse Practitioner will discuss with you the recommendation for an axillary lymph node clearance and what the operation involves.

It is always good to have another person (a friend or relative) come with you to an appointment where results are discussed. There can be quite a lot of information which will be new to you. Having another person listening and making notes (if you wish) can be very helpful.

What is the lymphatic system and why is it important?

The exact number of lymph nodes in a person's axilla can vary from around 10 up to 40 or more. The operation will aim to remove all the lymph nodes in your axilla. Lymph nodes and the lymphatic system are involved in the immune system and help your body fight infection. For this reason, after the operation your operated arm will be more at risk of infection than your other arm, which has not had axillary surgery.

After the operation you need to protect your hand and arm from possible infection. This means always wearing gloves when gardening, not having an intravenous cannula inserted into that arm, and (if possible) not having blood taken from that arm. Any damage to the skin on your arm or hand (a scratch or cut) should be washed and covered. You should seek medical attention if you are concerned that it is not healing or it shows signs of infection.

What are the risks?

All operations have risks and complications, although for most people this operation is usually straightforward. This leaflet explains what you can expect before, during and after your axillary lymph node clearance.

Lymphoedema

The most serious complication from an axillary lymph node clearance can be lymphoedema. This is a swelling of the arm as a result of a build-up of lymphatic fluid. This is due to the damage caused to the lymphatic system, which can happen when we remove all the lymph nodes.

You should expect your arm to feel different after the operation. There may not be any obvious swelling, but you may notice your watch or rings feel a little tighter. Very few people have severe lymphoedema, where their arm is very swollen.

You will have an appointment made for you to come to a group talk, to meet the Specialist Lymphoedema Nurses who are experts at managing this condition.

If you do develop lymphoedema, there are massage exercises/ techniques and special compression sleeves which can help with this. The Specialist Lymphoedema Nurses will explain all this to you. You may only need to meet the Specialist Lymphoedema Nurses once, or may wish to be seen more regularly.

If lymphoedema develops months or years after your surgery (which can sometimes happen), you will still be able to get in touch with the Lymphoedema Service. If you need support or advice they can be accessed through your GP or the Breast Team. If you have already been assessed by them you will be able to contact them directly.

Other complications

All operations have a risk of infection or bleeding. The surgeon will give you some antibiotics during the operation, to reduce the risk of infection. They will also use specific instruments which will reduce the risk of bleeding.

There is a nerve which gives sensation to the skin on the inner side of your upper arm, which will be affected by this operation. You will notice afterwards that you have a patch of skin in this area which feels different – usually it feels numb. Sometimes the sensation recovers but often this patch remains numb. Most people report that over time they get used to this and they are not so aware of it.

After the operation, a small collection of fluid can build up in your armpit, beneath the operation scar. This is called a seroma and is harmless. This fluid is usually absorbed back into the body and slowly reduces. Your Breast Nurse Practitioner may recommend draining this with a needle when she sees you in clinic. However, as this involves a small risk of introducing infection we will avoid doing this unless the seroma becomes very uncomfortable for you.

It is important that you carry out some gentle exercises to help prevent your shoulder from becoming stiff after this operation. Your Breast Nurse Practitioner will give you a leaflet about this.

Coming to hospital for your operation

This operation is usually carried out as a day case, which means you should not need to stay overnight in hospital. You will need a general anaesthetic for this operation. This means you will be asleep throughout the procedure.

Sometimes we need to use a thin plastic tube called a surgical drain, which comes out of the skin just below your armpit. This is used to collect fluid from the area that has been operated on. If a drain is used you will need to stay in hospital overnight. It should be removed the next day before you go home from hospital.

After your operation

You will have the phone number of your Breast Nurse Practitioner to contact if you have any concerns or questions. You will see your surgeon about two weeks after your operation, to discuss the results. At this appointment we will discuss any further treatments you might need and your surgeon will check your wound to make sure it has healed well.

How to contact us

Breast Nurse Practitioners

Tel: **01865 235 773** (Oxford)

Tel: **01295 224 196** (Banbury)

Jane Ashley Centre

Churchill Hospital, Oxford

Tel: **01865 235 350** or **01865 235 360**

Information and support groups

Maggie's Centre, Oxford

Maggie's offers free practical, emotional and social support to people with cancer and their families and friends.

Tel: **01865 751 882**

Website: www.maggiescentres.org/our-centres/maggies-oxford/

Maggie's CancerLinks

Information and advice about many types of cancer.

Website: cancerlinks.maggiescentres.org/

Breast Cancer Care – provide free information and one to one emotional support for you, your family and friends.

Tel: **0808 800 6000**

Website: www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support

Provides information, emotional support and practical advice for people with any kind of cancer.

Tel: **0808 808 0000**

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Benefits advice

The Macmillan Oxford CAB Benefits Advice service is based in the reception area of the Radiotherapy Centre at the Churchill Hospital. They are able to offer advice and support about financial and benefit issues to people with cancer and their carers and families.

This includes:

- checking eligibility for benefits
- help with applications and forms
- grant applications
- referrals to specialist advice services for housing, employment and debt advice
- information about and referrals to other sources of support.

They can give help over the phone, by email, at 'drop-in' sessions and by appointment, mainly at the Churchill Hospital but also one day a fortnight at the Brodey Centre at the Horton General Hospital. They can be contacted directly on 01865 227 083 or by email at macmillan.oxcab@gmail.com

Local Support Groups

Bosom Friends

An opportunity for a confidential chat with someone who has had breast cancer. They also meet monthly in Oxfordshire.

Tel: **01844 290 362**

Website: www.bosomfriends.org.uk

Brackley Support Group

Informal meetings are held monthly for women who have had breast cancer, offering support to each other.

Tel: **01869 810 735**

Banbury Support Group

A small self-help group that offers practical and emotional support. Informal meetings are held monthly.

Tel: **01295 720 993**

The Brodey Bunch

Bodicote, Banbury

A support group for young breast cancer patients. Meetings are held monthly and focus on issues that younger women may experience.

Tel: **01295 224 196**

Oxford Breast Buddy Group

An Oxford based group supporting anyone affected by breast cancer.

Website: www.oxfordbreastbuddygroup.co.uk/

Email: obbg@oxfordbreastbuddygroup.co.uk

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

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