Axillary Dissection

Information for patients

You have been given this leaflet to provide you with more information on the surgical procedure - Axillary Dissection.

What is an Axillary Dissection?

An axillary dissection is the name of a surgical procedure which removes lymph glands from your underarm area (the axilla).

Why do I need an axillary Dissection?

Your plastic surgeon will have explained that, as a result of investigations you have had, that there have been possible cancerous cells identified within the lymph nodes or glands in your axilla.

Lymph nodes or glands are essentially a filtration system of the body, with their primary function being to catch any virus and/or infection and stop it from spreading. Sometimes, if a person has had a skin cancer diagnosis, some of the cancerous cells can migrate to the lymph nodes closest to the affected area. The trapped cancer cells in the lymph node can grow and multiply, and then spread to the next lymph node and so on.

The surgical procedure of an axillary dissection is offered with an aim to remove affected lymph nodes from the axilla.

What happens to me?

This kind of surgical procedure requires you to have a general anaesthetic. This will mean that you will be put to sleep throughout the surgery, and you will need several days recovery in hospital.

The operation involves making a cut/incision under your arm in the axilla and removing the lymph nodes.

After the operation you may have a surgical drain under your arm to collect any extra fluid the body is producing as a result of removing your lymph nodes. This may have to stay in place for several weeks after the surgery.

You will have either stitches or staples to keep the wounds secure and some dressings on top. The nurses on the ward will look after these for you.

What are the risks of the surgery?

As with any surgical procedure your Consultant will discuss the risks of this surgery with you and weigh these risks up against the benefits of the surgery.

Specific risks which you may face when having an axillary dissection are:

- Numbness to the skin - Because of the extent of the surgery, sometimes the patient can experience numb patches on the skin. Sensation may or may not return over the course of months.

Stiffness or reduced movement to the shoulder - Sometimes the surgeon has to remove certain nerves or muscles in order to get the affected lymph nodes out. The physiotherapy team will assess you and help where needed.

Seroma – This is a collection of clear 'sterile' fluid that your own body has produced., However, the lymph nodes that would normally deal with the fluid are no longer there, and you may therefore need a few hospital visits to have this drained for a number of weeks after surgery, until your body adjusts.

Lymphoedema – This is swelling of the arm due to the lymph nodes no longer draining the fluid. Sometimes you may need to wear a specially made compression glove to help to resolve this.

How long will I be in Hospital for?

There is no specific timeframe for this procedure as each patient's care will depend on how they are recovering as individuals. An estimate can be discussed with your surgeon so that you can prepare your loved ones and dependants for the time that you will be in the hospital.

Is this the end of my treatment?

An axillary dissection surgery can sometimes be main treatment, or it may be offered in conjunction with other therapies. These will be discussed by the expert team and offered to you with full consideration of your wishes. You are part of the decision-making process in your care and can voice any concerns.

Who should I call if I have any Questions?

You may or may not have met once of our Clinical Nurse Specialists in Clinic. Their role is to support you, inform you and your family and be a point of contact for you to ask questions. You can contact them via the Cancer Navigation Hub 0300 123 1600.

For more information on the Cancer Navigation Hub please scan this QR code:

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It's OK to Ask

When you understand what's going on with your health, you can make better decisions around your care and treatment.

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