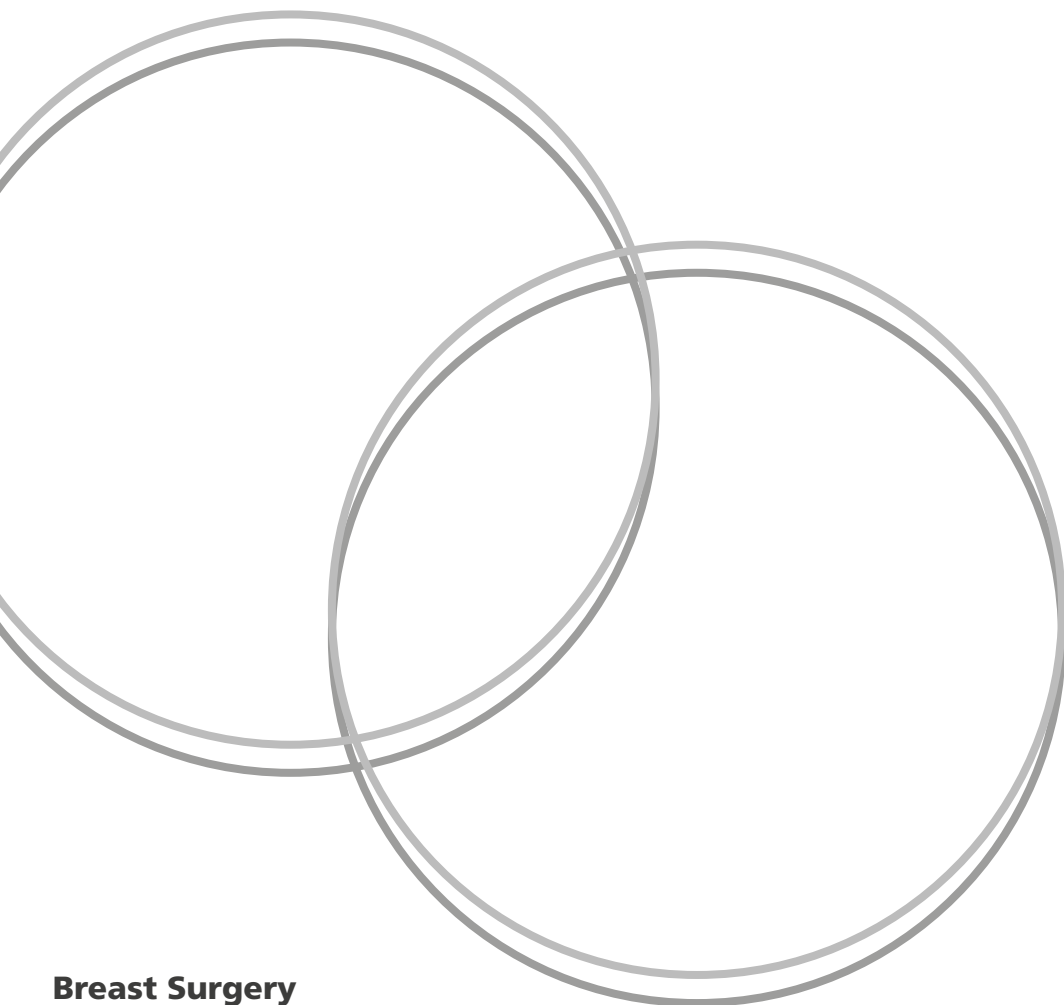




Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Axillary lymph node clearance

Information for patients



Breast Surgery

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 Specialist 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.

If you do develop lymphoedema, there are massage exercises/ techniques and special compression sleeves which can help with this. The Breast Nurse Specialists can give you some initial advice and refer you to the lymphoedema service.

If lymphoedema develops months or years after your surgery (which can sometimes happen), you will still be able to be referred to the Lymphedema service by your or GP or 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 Specialist will give you a leaflet about this.

Pre-admission appointment

You will be contacted to come for a pre-operative assessment. They will do bloods, your blood pressure and other tests if required to ensure your fitness for a general anaesthetic.

Some patients having surgery with sedation and local anaesthetics may also have an assessment.

The pre-admission team will advise regarding taking of your normal medications on the day and will give you a written plan of any medications that need to be omitted.

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, but you will need someone to stay with you overnight. 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 may 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 Specialist to contact if you have any concerns or questions. You will have a telephone / video call from your surgeon about two weeks after your operation, to discuss the results. At this appointment they will discuss any further treatments you might need and check with you that your wound is healing well. If any concerns an appointment for the Breast Nurse Specialist to see and review the wound can be made.

How to contact us

Breast Nurse Specialists

Telephone: 01865 235 773 (Oxford).

Answerphone calls are picked up between the hours of 9am and 4pm, Monday to Friday.

Please be advised we do not work weekends or Bank Holidays.

Any messages left will be responded to on the next working day.

If your call is urgent and in need of medical attention please call 111.

Ashley Surgical Day Unit

Telephone: 01865 225 283

Open 7.30am to 8.00pm, Monday to Saturday.

Wytham Ward (Surgical Ward)

Telephone: 01865 235 380

Daycase Surgical Unit

Horton General Hospital Banbury.

Telephone: 01295 229 239 or 01295 229 767

Opens at 8.00am.

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.

Telephone: 01865 751 882

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

Breast Cancer Now

Provide free information and one to one emotional support for you, your family and friends.

Telephone: 0808 800 6000

Monday to Friday, 9am to 4pm. Saturday, 9am to 1pm.

Website: <https://breastcancernow.org>

Macmillan Cancer Support

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

Telephone: 0808 808 0000

7 days a week 8am to 8pm.

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Benefits advice

This advice can be sought from Macmillan Oxford either via telephone or email:

Telephone: 01865 957 828

National number: 0808 808 00 00

Email: macmillan@citizensadviceoxford.org.uk

We also have a benefits advisor based at The Maggie's Centre Oxford.

You can contact them through the Maggie's website or phone /drop in to make an appointment. Contact details already mentioned.

They can help with the following:

- 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.

Local support groups

Oxford Breast Buddy Group

Website: www.oxfordbreastbuddygroup.co.uk

Maggie's Breast Cancer Networking and Support Group

Call: 01865 751 882

Email: <mailto:oxford@maggies.org> or
oxford@maggies.org

Positively Pink Oxford

Call Jean: 07927 236 961

Email: positivelypinkoxford@gmail.com

Website: <https://sites.google.com/view/positivelypinkoxford/home>

Ridgeway Breast Care Support

Based in Swindon covers Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, and Oxfordshire.

Website: www.ridgewaybreastcaresupportgroup.org.uk

Banbury Breast Cancer Support

Call Brenda: 01295 250 249 or 07719 455 669

Brackley Support Group

Call Linda: 01869 810 735 or 07708 359 135

Breast Friends Aylesbury

Call: 07743 350 833

Email: info@breastfriends-aylesbury.org.uk

Website: www.breastfriends-aylesbury.org.uk

Bosom Pals Milton Keynes

Email: info@bosompalsmk.co.uk

Website: www.bosompalsmk.co.uk

Butterflies-Breast Cancer Support Group, Swindon

Call Tina: 07941 282 372

Email: mailto:tmpgpp7129@outlook.com or
tmpgpp7129@outlook.com

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information



Making a difference across our hospitals

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