INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Wide Local Excision and Axillary Node Clearance

Wide Local Excision (Lumpectomy)
Removal of a cancer with a small margin of surrounding breast tissue (wide local excision) followed by radiotherapy produces equivalent results to mastectomy both for cancer control and survival.

A wide local excision involves making an incision (cut) in the skin over the breast cancer and removing the cancer with a rim of surrounding breast tissue. Small metal clips are left in the area where the lump has been removed to mark the site on later mammograms. Following removal of the cancer, any bleeding is stopped and the skin is closed with an invisible stitch, which does not need to be removed.

- The portion of tissue removed is examined and a report is available in approximately 10 days. In about 10% of women abnormal changes are found to extend up to the edges of the tissue removed, in which case a second operation to remove further tissue is required.

Problems which can happen after wide local excision

- Even though all visible bleeding is stopped during the operation, bleeding from the cut edges of the breast tissue can occasionally start afterwards and cause blood to collect in the wound. This is uncommon, and happens in about 1 in every 100 patients. The normal time for this to develop is within the first 12 hours after the operation. This is the reason your wound is checked following surgery. If a large amount of blood collects this needs draining, usually by a second operation.

- Infection: any operation site can become infected. It is uncommon to get infection in breast wounds, but approximately 2 in every 100 women, after wide local excision, do get infection. If infection develops, it usually takes a week after surgery before any changes are seen. When the wound is infected it becomes red, swollen and very tender and there can be a discharge through the wound.

- The body produces its own natural healing fluid. Sometimes it can produce a little too much fluid, and this causes a swelling at the site where the lump was removed. This is known as a seroma, and this fluid may require removal with a needle and syringe when you come back to the clinic. Because the area is numb following surgery, this is usually a painless procedure.
• As a result of removing the cancer with some surrounding tissue, the treated breast may be smaller than the normal breast. Depending on the position of the tumour the treated breast may also change in shape. Approximately 1 in 10 women do get a poor cosmetic result after wide excision and radiotherapy. In these women, it may be possible to reshape the breast at a later date.

Axillary Node Clearance

The axilla is a medical term used to describe the armpit. There are approximately 20 lymph glands in the armpit. The lymph glands are the most common site to which breast cancer spreads. Lymph node clearance aims to remove all the lymph glands to check first whether any of the glands are affected and if so exactly how many are involved, and second to remove the glands so that if they are affected, no cancer is left behind. The operation is performed through a cut (incision) in your armpit just below where your hair grows. At the end of the operation the wound is closed with an invisible stitch that does not need to be removed. A drain is placed to remove excess fluid. This is usually removed the following day.

Problems which can happen after axillary node clearance

• Even though all visible bleeding is stopped during the operation, bleeding can start from the edges of the wound after the operation and cause blood to collect in the wound. This is uncommon and happens in about 1 in every 100 patients. The normal time for this to develop is within the first 12 hours after operation. Because of this possibility your wound is checked regularly following surgery.

• The most common problem is pain, swelling and discomfort under the arm which lasts for a few weeks. Do not be afraid to take regular painkillers. Ensure the arm keeps mobile by practising the exercises taught to you while in the ward.

• The fluid which normally passes through the lymph glands can cause a swelling under the arm. Sometimes this needs to be removed with a needle and syringe. The build up of fluid which is called a seroma occurs in about two thirds of women following axillary node clearance. If this happens before or after your scheduled clinic visit a time can be arranged by contacting our Clinical Nurse Specialist or Ward 6. Because the area next to the wound does not have proper feeling this is usually a painless procedure. Some people need this fluid drained on a number of occasions but this is not an important problem and usually settles within a few weeks of surgery.

• Numbness: there are nerves which pass through the armpit to the inner side of the arm. These nerves are sometimes damaged during removal of all the lymph glands. Your surgeon will make every attempt not to damage these nerves. Even if the nerves are not cut they will be stretched and it takes some time after the operation before the feeling returns. You should be prepared therefore for some slight loss of feeling in the upper inner part of the arm on the side of the surgery. In about half of patients this will be recovered over the first few months after operation.

• The length of time spent in hospital following this operation is routinely overnight. In some cases this may be longer on the advice of the medical team.
• Shoulder stiffness: you will be taught a series of exercises after the operation. It is important that these are carried out. Shoulder stiffness and reduction in movement of the shoulder is a common problem in those who do not manage to do their shoulder exercises. You may get some pain and discomfort after the operation and you may experience soreness when performing your exercises. Do not be afraid to take regular painkillers after the operation as this will make it less painful and allow you to do your exercises with less discomfort. During this period of recovery there may be some pain or discomfort down the inside of your upper arm but this usually settles after a few weeks.

• Arm swelling: The removal of lymph nodes from the axilla may result in swelling affecting your arm and/or breast. This is called lymphoedema. Sometimes swelling of the arm may occur soon after surgery. This usually goes back to normal and is not lymphoedema. If you experience swelling or a feeling of heaviness in your arm and think you may be developing lymphoedema you should speak to your GP or health care professional for advice.

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