

Removing lymph nodes during breast cancer surgery (exeresis or biopsy)



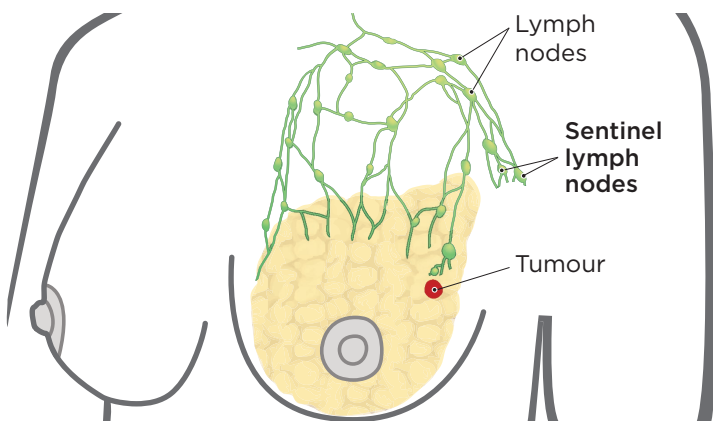
During your breast cancer surgery, the doctor (surgeon) may remove one or more of the axillary (armpit) lymph nodes to analyze them and see the extent of the cancer. This fact sheet explains this procedure and how it works.

What are lymph nodes and sentinel lymph nodes?

Lymph nodes are glands of varying size, no larger than a pea and linked in chains. They filter lymph, a clear liquid that circulates in our body. Lymph nodes defend the area of the body where they are located against infections, among other things.

The nodes that are most representative of the general condition of the armpit nodes are called sentinel lymph nodes. They are often close to the tumour. In general, they are the first ones to receive lymph coming from the area around the tumour. So they should be the first nodes to contain cancer cells.

Sentinel lymph nodes



Position of sentinel lymph nodes in the case of a breast tumour.

Why should my lymph nodes be removed?

This is done to see how far the cancer has spread and to propose the best treatment for your case.

What does the procedure involve?

Sentinel lymph nodes are removed to see if they contain cancer cells. Usually, the procedure is done at the same time as the surgery to remove the tumour.

If possible, the surgeon only removes the sentinel lymph nodes. This avoids a larger operation that would remove all lymph nodes (axillary lymph node dissection). It also reduces the risk of complications. But in some cases, the surgeon will need to remove everything. He or she will tell you which procedure is the right one for you.

How long does the procedure take?

The surgeon removes the lymph nodes at the same time as your tumour. In general, removing these lymph nodes does not add very much to the total time of the operation, which can vary from case to case.



What happens during the procedure?

The procedure is done in two or three stages.

- 1** During your operation, the surgeon injects a mildly radioactive product next to the tumour and sometimes a blue dye. This makes the sentinel lymph nodes in the tumour area a little radioactive and stains them. In some cases, the injection may be done in radiology on the morning of your surgery.
- 2** The surgeon identifies and removes these lymph nodes. They will be analyzed in the lab, most often after your surgery. If the analysis doesn't find any cancerous cell, no other lymph nodes will be removed.
- 3** If cancer cells are found, all the lymph nodes in the axillary chain (armpit) could be removed. Often this is done in a second step.

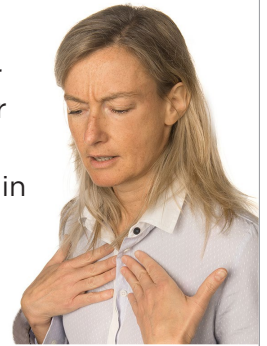
Will I have a scar?

Usually, yes. The location of the scar depends on where the lymph nodes are removed. Talk with your surgeon about this.

Can there be any problems or complications?

Yes, as with any surgery. The main possible problems are:

- Pain or discomfort in the area or nearby limb (armpit and arm, for example).
- "Bruising" or blood-coloured stain under the skin (ecchymosis).
- Blue dye stain. Sometimes the skin stays marked by the dye. This will fade over time. The dye will go into your urine, which will be greenish the first few times.
- Very low risk of swelling (lymphedema) in the area or arm of the operated side. Talk to your doctor about this. See the fact sheet on [Lymphedema](#) (French only).
- Infection.
- Mild numbness or pain in the area or nearby arm that usually goes away over time.



If all lymph nodes have been removed (dissection), you may also have a slightly higher risk of swelling (lymphedema).

Are there precautions to take AFTER the surgery?

There are many fact sheets available on the care and exercises to do after your surgery, depending on the type of operation you have had. It is recommended that you start doing the prescribed exercises on the day after your surgery. See the Useful Resources note on page 3.

Your healthcare team can tell you which fact sheets correspond to your case.



Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

Call the clinic nurse, Monday to Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

> **514 890-8000, extension 14319**

Outside of business hours, call:

> **514 890-8086**

This support service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When calling, be sure to have your health insurance card on hand.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society:

> **cancer.ca**

CICC website:

> **cicc.chumontreal.qc.ca**

Click on the tab “Cancer du sein” (French only)

Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation:

> **rubanrose.org/en**

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



NOTEPAD



Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.



The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
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