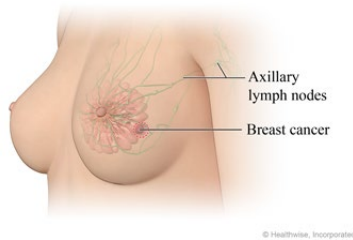


## Axillary Lymph Node Dissection: Before Your Surgery

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### **What is an axillary lymph node dissection?**

Lymph nodes move and filter fluids between body tissues and the bloodstream. Because of this, cancer cells often spread to the lymph nodes. An axillary lymph node dissection is surgery to remove lymph nodes from under your arm.

This surgery is usually done during your lumpectomy or mastectomy. During this surgery, your doctor will remove lymph nodes that have cancer and those that cancer could easily spread to. This surgery reduces the chance that the cancer could come back. It also helps your doctor plan further treatment for you.

After your lymph nodes are removed, you will be at greater risk for swelling in your arm. This is called lymphedema. You will have to take good care of your affected arm. Your doctor or physiotherapist will tell you what to look for. They will also teach you how to take care of your arm.

This surgery may be done at the same time as other breast surgeries. If this is the case, how you prepare may be different.

When you find out that you have cancer, you may feel many emotions and may need some help coping. Seek out family, friends, and counsellors for support. You also can do things at home to make yourself feel better while you go through treatment. Call the Canadian Cancer Society (1-888-939-3333) or visit its website at [www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca) for more information.

**Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety.** Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

### **How do you prepare for surgery?**

Surgery can be stressful. This information will help you understand what you can expect. And it will help you safely prepare for surgery.



## Preparing for surgery

- Be sure you have someone to take you home. Anesthesia and pain medicine will make it unsafe for you to drive or get home on your own.
- If you take aspirin or some other blood thinner, ask your doctor if you should stop taking it before your surgery. Make sure that you understand exactly what your doctor wants you to do. These medicines increase the risk of bleeding.
- Tell your doctor ALL the medicines and natural health products you take. Some may increase the risk of problems during your surgery. Your doctor will tell you if you should stop taking any of them before the surgery and how soon to do it.
- Make sure your doctor and the hospital have a copy of your goals of care plan. It lets others know your health care wishes. It's a good thing to have before any type of surgery or procedure.

### Plan Ahead

- **Plan a ride home.** Ask a family member or friend to bring you home after your hospital stay.
- **Plan for meals.** Good nutrition is important for your recovery, but cooking may be harder to do right after you get home. Prepare and freeze meals before your surgery or ask friends and family to help you cook or shop for groceries.
- **Get help with chores.** After you get home you may need help. For a short time after your surgery, you may be told to avoid certain physical activities. Plan ahead and arrange to have some help with chores after your surgery.
- **Buy gum or hard candies.** Chewing gum and sucking on hard candies may help get your bowels moving after surgery.

### Be as healthy as possible

- **Be active.** Being active before surgery will make it easier for you to be active after surgery. If you're normally active, keep doing your regular activities up to the day of your surgery. If you aren't used to exercising, start slowly. You can start by going for 15 minute walks.
- **Eat healthy.** Eating healthy foods will give your body the nutrients it needs to prepare for and handle the surgery. Eat healthy foods and drink enough fluids in the weeks before your surgery. Your healthcare team will tell you how long before surgery that you need to stop eating and drinking.
- **Manage your medical conditions.** If you have other medical conditions, such as anemia or high or low blood sugar, ask your healthcare team what you need to do to prepare for surgery.

- **Quit tobacco.** You can heal faster and prevent lung problems after surgery if you quit tobacco. Aim to quit smoking and using tobacco and tobacco-like products at least 4 weeks before surgery. Talk to your healthcare team about ways to quit or cut back.
- **Don't drink alcohol 24 hours before surgery.** Alcohol, cannabis, and other drugs may interact with medicines you take before and after surgery. Talk to your healthcare team if you need help stopping or cutting back on alcohol, cannabis, or other drugs.

**Do the following before your surgery to help you feel better sooner and recover faster.**

### **The day before surgery**

- Know the time of your surgery, when you need to be at the hospital, and where you need to go when you get there.
- Follow any instructions the healthcare team or your surgeon gave you for your medicines (including herbal or complementary medicines).
- Don't drink alcohol 24 hours before your surgery.



- **Stop** eating at midnight. This is very important!



Stop eating and drinking all non-clear fluids at midnight. This is very important

- You may **DRINK CLEAR FLUIDS ONLY** up to 3 hours before surgery. This includes **BLACK** coffee, tea, Gatorade, apple juice and water.

### **Morning of surgery**

Plan to arrive at the hospital on time.

- Follow any instructions provided
- Bring all of the things you packed for your hospital stay **if** you are being admitted.
- Follow **all** other instructions the healthcare team gave you to prepare for surgery.
- Bring your CPAP if you use one



### **What happens on the day of surgery?**

Follow the instructions exactly about when to stop eating and drinking. If you don't, your surgery may be cancelled. If your doctor told you to take your medicines on the day of surgery, take them with only a sip of water.

- Take a bath or shower before you come in for your surgery. Do not apply lotions, perfumes, deodorants, or nail polish.

- Do not shave the surgical site yourself.
- Take off all jewellery and piercings. And take out contact lenses, if you wear them.

### **At the hospital**



Bring a picture I.D. health card.

- The area for surgery is often marked to make sure there are no errors.
- You will be kept comfortable and safe by your anesthesia provider.

### **When should you call your doctor?**

- You have questions or concerns.
- You don't understand how to prepare for your surgery.
- You become ill before the surgery (such as fever, flu, or a cold).
- You need to reschedule or have changed your mind about having the surgery.

### Axillary Lymph Node Dissection: What to Expect at Home

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#### **Your Recovery**

Right after the surgery you will probably feel weak, and your shoulder area will feel sore and stiff for a few days. It may be hard to move your arm and shoulder in all directions. Your doctor or physiotherapist will teach you some arm exercises. You now have a higher chance of swelling in the affected arm. This is called lymphedema. From now on, you will have to be careful when using your arm.

You will have a scar under your arm that will fade over time. You may also notice a hollow area in your armpit. It may also feel like you have a lump in your armpit. You may lose some feeling under your arm, or the arm may have a tingling or burning feeling. The loss of feeling may last only a little while, or it may last the rest of your life.

You will probably be able to go back to work or your normal routine in 3 to 6 weeks. This depends on the type of work you do and any further treatment. If cancer was found in the lymph nodes, you will probably need more treatment.

#### **How can you care for yourself at home?**



#### **Activity**

- Rest when you feel tired. Getting enough sleep will help you recover.

- Try to walk each day. Start by walking a little more than you did the day before. Bit by bit, increase the amount you walk. Walking boosts blood flow and helps prevent pneumonia and constipation.
- Avoid strenuous activities, such as biking, jogging, weightlifting, or aerobic exercise, until your doctor says it is okay.
- For 4 weeks avoid lifting anything that weighs more than 10-15 lbs or that would make you strain. This may include heavy grocery bags and milk containers, a heavy briefcase or backpack, cat litter or dog food bags, a vacuum cleaner, or a child.
- You may shower 24 to 48 hours after surgery. Pat the cut (incision) dry. Do not take a bath for the first 2 weeks, or until your doctor tells you it is okay.
- Take precautions to prevent infection and swelling in your arm. This is called lymphedema.
  - Do not let anyone take blood pressure in that arm.
  - Do not carry heavy purses, suitcases, grocery bags, and other heavy items with that arm.
  - Keep the skin of that arm well moisturized.
  - Wear medical alert jewellery that says you can develop lymphedema.



## **Diet**

- Start off with light foods such as soup, toast and tea. Avoid dairy and fatty foods.
- You may notice that your bowel movements are not regular right after your surgery. This is common. Try to avoid constipation and straining with bowel movements. You may want to take a fibre supplement every day. If you have not had a bowel movement after a couple of days, ask your doctor about taking a mild laxative.



## **Medicines**

- Your doctor will tell you if and when you can restart your medicines. He or she will also give you instructions about taking any new medicines.
- If you take aspirin or some other blood thinner, ask your doctor if and when to start taking it again. Make sure that you understand exactly what your doctor wants you to do.
  - If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it as prescribed.
  - If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter medicine.
- If your doctor prescribed antibiotics, take them as directed. Do not stop taking them just because you feel better. You need to take the full course of antibiotics.



## Incision care

- If you have strips of tape on the cut (incision) the doctor made, leave the tape on for a week or until it falls off.
- After 24 to 48 hours, wash the area daily with warm, soapy water and pat it dry. Keep the area clean and dry.
- You may cover the area with a gauze bandage if it weeps or rubs against clothing.



## Exercise

- You will need to do arm exercises once your doctor tells you it is okay. Do the range-of-motion exercises as instructed by your doctor.

## Elevation

- Prop up your arm on a pillow anytime you sit or lie down. Try to keep it above the level of your heart. This will help reduce swelling.



## Other instructions

- You may have a drain in your armpit. Follow your drain instruction sheet on how to empty and care for it.

**Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety.** Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

## Discharge

### How you may feel after your operation

- You may feel nauseated, light headed dizzy or sleepy for up to 24 hours after your surgery
- You may have a slight temperature for 2 days
- You may feel tired for a few days after your surgery

**For 24 hours after your surgery do not....** Drive a vehicle  
Operate heavy equipment

Drink alcohol or smoke  
Make any important or legal decisions

## At Home

Slowly get more active.

- Eat healthy and drink fluids as you did before surgery (unless your healthcare team gives you other instructions).
- Drink oral nutritional supplements (like Ensure Protein Max) for the first month after surgery to give you extra protein and help you heal faster.
- Take less pain medicine as your pain gets better.
- Take your blood thinner and other medicines as you were told.

What is anesthesia?

Anesthesia controls pain. And it keeps all your organs working normally during surgery or another kind of procedure.

Anesthesia can relax you. It can also make you sleepy or forgetful. Or it may make you unconscious. It depends on what kind you get.

Your anesthesia provider (anesthesiologist) will make sure you are comfortable and safe during the procedure or surgery.

There are different types of anesthesia.

- **Local anesthesia.** This type numbs a small part of the body. Doctors use it for simple procedures.
  - You get a shot in the area the doctor will work on.
  - You will feel some pressure during the procedure.
  - You may stay awake. Or you may get medicine to help you relax or sleep.
- **Regional anesthesia.** This type blocks pain to a larger area of the body. It can also help relieve pain right after surgery. And it may reduce your need for other pain medicine after surgery. There are different types. They include:
  - Peripheral nerve block. This is a shot near a specific nerve or group of nerves. It blocks pain in the part of the body supplied by the nerve. This is often used for procedures on the hands, arms, feet, legs, or face.
  - Epidural and spinal anesthesia. This is a shot near the spinal cord and the nerves around it. It blocks pain from an entire area of the body, such as the belly, hips, or legs.
- **General anesthesia.** This type affects the brain and the whole body. You may get it through a small tube placed in a vein (IV). You are unconscious and will not feel pain.

During the surgery, you will be comfortable. Later, you will not remember much about the surgery.

What type will you have?

The type of anesthesia you have depends on many things, such as:

- The type of surgery or procedure and the reason you are having it.
- Test results, such as blood tests.
- How worried you feel about the surgery.
- Your health. Your doctor and nurses will ask you about any past surgeries. They will ask about any health problems you may have, such as diabetes, lung or heart disease, or a history of stroke. They will want to know if you take medicine, such as blood thinners. Your doctor may also ask if any family members have had any problems with anesthesia. You will talk with your anesthesia provider about your options. In many cases, you may be able to choose the type of anesthesia you have.

What can you expect after having anesthesia?

Right after the surgery, you will be in the recovery room. Nurses will make sure you are comfortable. As the anesthesia wears off, you may feel some pain and discomfort from your surgery.

Tell someone if you have pain. Pain medicine works better if you take it before the pain gets bad.

You may feel some of the effects of anesthesia for a while. It takes time for the effects of the medicine to completely wear off.

- If you had local or regional anesthesia you may feel numb and have less feeling in part of your body. It may also take a few hours for you to be able to move and control your muscles as usual.
- When you first wake up from general anesthesia, you may be confused. Or it may be hard to think clearly. This is normal.
- Don't do anything for 24 hours that requires attention to detail. This includes going to work, making important decisions, or signing any legal documents.

Other common side effects of anesthesia include:

- Nausea and vomiting. This does not usually last long. It can be treated with medicine.
- A slight drop in body temperature. You may feel cold and shiver when you first wake up.



- A sore throat, if you had general anesthesia.
- Muscle aches or weakness.
- Feeling tired.

You may go home the same day of surgery or you may stay in the hospital. Your doctor will check on your recovery from the anesthesia. He or she will answer any questions you may have.

For answers to frequently asked questions about your anesthetic, please visit <https://www.cas.ca/en/about-cas/advocacy/anesthesia-faq>



### **When should you call for help?**

**Call 911** anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You have chest pain, are short of breath

**Call your doctor** or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have signs of a blood clot in your leg (called a deep vein thrombosis), such as:
  - Pain in your calf, back of the knee, thigh, or groin.
  - Redness or swelling in your leg or groin.
- You have loose stitches, or your incision comes open.
- Bright red blood has soaked through the bandage over your incision.
- You have signs of infection, such as:
  - Increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness.
  - Red streaks leading from the incision.
  - Pus draining from the incision.
- A fever.