

Axillary lymph node dissection

What is an axillary lymph node dissection?

In most surgeries for breast cancer, the lymph nodes in the axilla or armpit are removed. This type of surgery is called an axillary lymph node dissection. The lymph nodes are checked in the laboratory to see if the cancer cells have spread to the nodes. The results of this test help to decide if you need chemotherapy or hormone therapy after surgery.

What do lymph nodes do?

The lymph system is part of the immune system. It protects the body against diseases. The lymph system is made up of ducts and nodes. The lymph nodes drain and filter such things as bacteria, viruses and tumour cells from the body.

Most lymph vessels from the breast drain into lymph nodes in the axilla or armpit. Other lymph vessels drain into the nodes behind the breast bone.

How will I feel after an axillary node dissection?

You will have an incision under your arm as well as your breast. This may be more painful than the incision on your breast because the movement of your arm pulls on the incision.

You may have a drainage tube in your incision. This is usually removed in 5 to 10 days. You may have home care.

You may notice some numbness in your arm. This is because some of the nerves are cut or stretched during surgery. Normal feelings usually return to the arm, however, some numbness may never go away.

You can expect some discomfort and stiffness in your shoulder. This will improve with time and exercise.

Some patients, although rarely, do have swelling in their arm and hand. You can help reduce the swelling in your arm by doing your exercises and elevating your arm often during the day.