

Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy for Melanoma

What is a Sentinel Lymph Node?

Lymph nodes collect and drain fluid. There are lymph nodes all over the body.

When you have a skin cancer like melanoma, cells from the tumour may escape and move into the lymph nodes. The sentinel lymph node is the first node that drains the skin from the area where the melanoma is located. There may be more than one node affected and these are called sentinel nodes.

What is a Sentinel Lymph Node biopsy?

This is a procedure that removes one or more lymph nodes to test for cancer cells. A special doctor called a pathologist examines the cells to see if they contain cancer.

How is this done?

You will go to the Day Surgery Unit to be registered and prepare for surgery. You will change into a gown and have a thin tube put into your arm to give you fluids. This is called an IV.

2 to 3 hours before surgery, a porter will take you to the Nuclear Medicine Department. You will lie on a narrow table. A Nuclear Medicine Technologist will inject a small amount of a radioactive liquid into the skin around the tumour. There will be 4 injections and they will cause some pain and discomfort but this will go away in a few minutes.

You will then lie quietly on an imaging bed as the bed moves under a large machine containing a special camera. The technologist will take a couple of pictures from different angles. This machine picks up the radioactive material and follows it as it flows to your lymph nodes.

During surgery, your doctor can look at these pictures to know where the sentinel node is located.

You will then go to the operating room. You may have general or local anesthetic. You and your doctor decide this. A general anesthetic means you sleep during the procedure. With a local anesthetic, freezing is put into the area and you are awake during the procedure.

The doctor then injects a blue-coloured dye into your skin. The dye travels to the sentinel nodes as well.

When the doctor locates the sentinel node(s) he makes a small incision about 4 cms or 1½ inches. The doctor removes the sentinel node(s). This sample is sent to the laboratory to be examined for cancer cells. The report comes back to your doctor in about 1 week.

This procedure takes 1 to 1½ hours.

What happens if the sentinel node(s) shows cancer cells?

You will have an appointment to see your doctor after the results are back. You will get the results of the biopsy and talk about a treatment plan during this visit.

What happens after surgery?

You may have some pain or discomfort at the incision. You will be given pain control medication to help.

The dye may turn your urine green for about 24 hours.

You may have some swelling in the area of the incision. This depends on the number of nodes removed.

How long will I be in the hospital?

Most people go home a few hours after surgery.

How do I take care of my incision?

Your incision will be closed with special strips or dry dressing.

You can have a shower the next day.

You can follow your normal daily activities when you go home.

When do I see my doctor again?

Before you leave the hospital, you will be given an appointment to see your doctor. If you do not have an appointment, call your doctor to make one when you are home.

Contact your doctor if you have:

- increased swelling in the area when you are home