
Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy In the Breast

What is a sentinel lymph node?

Each breast and tissue around it contains lymph nodes. Lymph nodes collect and drain fluid. There are also lymph nodes all over the body.

When you have breast cancer, cells from the tumour may escape and move into the lymph nodes. The sentinel lymph node is the first node that contains cancer cells. 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 1 to 3 lymph nodes to test them for cancer cells. A special doctor examines the cells to see if they contain cancer.

The procedure is usually done at the same time as the breast surgery.

What will happen?

On the day before surgery or the morning of surgery you will go to the Nuclear Medicine Department. You will change into a gown and lie on a narrow table. A small amount of a radioactive liquid will be injected into the breast. You will have about 3 needles. This may cause some discomfort.

While you are on the table, it moves under a large machine with a camera. This machine confirms the injection. By doing this the doctor can see where he or she will operate.

In the operating room, the doctor may inject a blue dye into the breast. This dye travels through the breast to the sentinel node(s). The doctor locates the sentinel node(s) then makes a small incision under the arm. The doctor removes the sentinel node(s). This sample may be sent to the laboratory to be examined for cancer cells right away. Allergic reactions to the dye are extremely rare.

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What happens if the sentinel node(s) contain cancer?

If the report comes back as cancer cells while you are still in the operating room, the doctor may take out more lymph nodes in your armpit area. You will see the doctor after the surgery to talk about your treatment plan. Sometimes further surgery is needed.

If you are out of the operating room, you will see your doctor later and talk about a treatment plan based on the final results.

What happens after surgery?

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

The blue dye will turn your urine green for about 24 hours. Your breast may also have a bluish colour for a few days or sometimes longer.

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

How long will I be in the hospital?

Most women go home a few hours after surgery.

How do I take care of my incision?

Your incision will be covered with dry gauze. You can shower in 48 hours.

When do I see my doctor again?

You should have a follow-up appointment with your doctor in 1 to 2 weeks. Call for an appointment if you have not been given one.