

Sentinel Node Factsheet

What is Sentinel Node?

The sentinel node (gland) is the first lymph node or nodes in your armpit to which breast cancer can spread.

What is Sentinel Node Biopsy?

By removing up to 4 sentinel lymph nodes, we can find out whether the breast cancer has or has not spread to the armpit nodes. This important information helps us to advise you about the stage of your cancer and the best type of breast cancer treatment for you.

Recent studies have shown that removal of up to 4 sentinel lymph nodes is just as safe and accurate as traditional armpit surgery which removes more nodes.

Side Effects of Armpit Surgery

For some patients armpit node removal can cause temporary shoulder stiffness, nerve pain and/or chronic Lymphoedema (swelling of the arm). The side effects of armpit surgery increase with the number of nodes removed.

Finding the Sentinel Node

Either the day before or on the day of surgery a small amount of radioactive fluid will be injected near the cancer. This fluid travels to the sentinel node. You may have a scan to mark the position of the sentinel node. During surgery a blue dye will be used to identify the nodes. The surgeon using a special radiation detection probe can then find the sentinel node or nodes which is also blue.

What if we cannot find the Sentinel Node?

Occasionally it is not possible to find the sentinel nodes. If this happens the surgeon will remove more nodes to make sure the node, which is likely to be the sentinel node, is removed. This may be done in the same operation, and only with your permission.

What if the Sentinel Node looks cancerous at surgery?

Occasionally at the time of surgery it can be obvious that the lymph nodes are cancerous. With your prior permission the surgeon may proceed to remove as many nodes as possible, this will save you a second armpit operation a few weeks later. This is not common.



After Surgery

The pathologist examines the sentinel node under the microscope; this takes a couple of weeks. **If the sentinel node contains cancer cells it is possible further cancerous nodes are still present in the armpit. For this reason you may require further armpit surgery to remove the remaining lymph nodes (on average 30% of people will need more surgery).**

What you need to know before signing the consent form:

What are the benefits of Sentinel Node Biopsy?

- Less discomfort and more early mobility in the shoulder/arm
- Less risk of Lymphoedema
- No drains
- Shorter hospital stay and quicker overall recovery

What are the disadvantages of Sentinel Node Biopsy?

- Blue dye will discolour urine, stools, contact lenses (please remove before surgery) tears etc for a few days. The breast skin will be discoloured for up to a few months and very occasionally a year or so.
- Allergic reaction to the blue dye can rarely occur whilst under anaesthetic. This can be treated but can (very rarely) be severe.
- Injection of radioactivity into the breast may give slight discomfort.
- If the pathologist finds the sentinel lymph node/nodes contain cancer, you will need more armpit treatment. This may require a second armpit operation.
- There is a small risk (less than 5%) that the procedure doesn't identify the right lymph node. In this instance it is possible that a lymph node containing cancer cells could be left behind undetected. The surgeon can inform you how big the risk of a "false negative" is in your own individual case.

Before the operation you will need to sign a consent form agreeing:

1. To have sentinel node biopsy using radioactive fluid and blue dye.
2. That if the surgeon cannot find the sentinel node or the glands look cancerous we are able to remove more nodes, whilst under the same anaesthetic. If you do not want this to happen you must tell us.

Adapted from the Royal College of Surgeons of England New Start Training Programme © 2005

