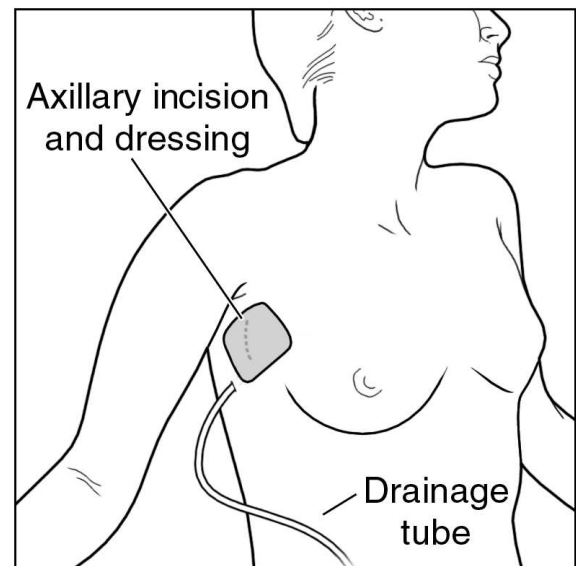


# All About Axillary Lymph Node Dissection

One of the most important goals of Moffitt Cancer Center is to provide you with quality patient care through education, research and service. This information has been developed to prepare you for undergoing an axillary node dissection and caring for yourself after the procedure. Members of your health care team will review this information with you and answer any questions that you may have.

## About the surgery:

Your doctor has recommended that you have an axillary lymph node dissection. This means that the lymph nodes in the underarm area will be removed and tested for the presence of cancer. The procedure will take approximately one to two hours of surgery time. The surgery is usually performed with monitored or general anesthesia, which means you will be sedated or put to sleep. You will have an incision under your arm. A clear dressing will cover it and you will be able to shower with these dressings in place. There will also be a drainage tube exiting *your* skin near the surgical site. The length of your hospital stay can vary from a few hours to a few days, depending on your needs. You will be discharged with this drainage tube in place.



The drainage tubes and dressing are left in place until your post-operative follow-up visit with the doctor.

## After surgery:

1. You will return to the clinic approximately one week after you are discharged from the hospital. Your surgeon will discuss the pathology results at that time. In addition, the surgical wound will be evaluated and the treatment plan and follow-up recommendations will be discussed. This appointment is the time for you to have all your questions answered. We encourage you to bring a list of questions you may have. You can also have a family member or friend with you during this appointment to help you remember the discussion between you and your doctor.
2. Your drainage tube will remain in place until the drainage has decreased to 30cc's or less for two consecutive days. The drainage is the body's normal response to the surgical procedure. The color of the drainage varies from yellow to blood-tinged red.
3. Once the drainage tube is removed, a hole is left in your side. This hole heals from the inside to the outside. A scab will develop 2 to 3 days later. You might notice drainage out of the hole until the scab forms. You may also develop swelling at or around the tube site from irritation. If you develop swelling in the armpit area after the tube is removed, contact the breast clinic. The increased fluid in tissues can produce tension on the healing incision and be a source of infection. You will need to continue to monitor for signs and symptoms of infection (redness, swelling, drainage, warmth at the incision site, or a fever higher than 101°F). If you notice any of these symptoms, call your doctor right away.

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**Most commonly asked questions:**

**Are all the lymph nodes in the underarm area removed?**

The majority of the lymph nodes are removed, but some remain. The few that remain are deep lymph nodes.

**I feel like I have a lump the size of a tennis ball (or larger) under my arm. Is that normal?**

Yes, this is to be expected after your operation. The sensation in the underarm is exaggerated because some nerves near the incision have been cut. The sensation can be compared to getting numbing medication when getting a tooth pulled. This sensation does become less noticeable over time, but may not ever go away completely.

**The skin of my inner upper arm on the side of the surgery is numb and very sensitive to touch. Will it go away?**

This is a common feeling following this surgery. These sensations become less noticeable over time, but may never go away. Nerves under the arm are cut during surgery. Since nerves heal slowly, you may experience numbness and sensitivity for a while.

**The drainage tube contains a long dark red strand. Is everything okay?**

Debris and blood cells collect in the fluid causing this to happen. This is normal. As long as there is drainage in the bulb there is no need to worry. Continue to care for the drain as you were instructed. It may be necessary to “milk” the drain more frequently to prevent clogging of the tube by these clots.

**What happens if there is leakage around the drainage site?**

Sometimes fluid leaks around the drain site causing the dressing to become wet. Again, as long as there is fluid draining into the bulb, there is no need to worry. You may have a clot in the tubing that needs to be worked through. If this happens, you should milk the tubing as you were instructed. If this does not stop the leak, call the clinic for further instructions. You may need to change the dressing if it becomes very wet.

**Will the swelling in my arm that occurred after the surgery ever go away?**

The swelling in your arm is due to the surgical interruption of the lymphatic vessels, which caused a build up of lymph fluid in the tissues of the arm. The swelling is called **lymphedema**. Lymphedema can occur at ANY time after the axillary node dissection, even years later. A physical therapy consultation will be prescribed after your surgery to evaluate and measure the function of the affected arm. Exercises and precautions will also be taught to help prevent complications due to lymphedema. In extreme cases of lymphedema, compression sleeves and pumps may be prescribed for you. It is important to remember that this is a life long risk. Contact your doctor right away if you notice an increase in the size of your arm.

**For more information, please ask for the following publications:**

*What Every Woman Facing Breast Cancer Should Know About Lymphedema* (American Cancer Society)

*Exercises and Precautions for Lymphedema Prevention after your Mastectomy, Lumpectomy and/ or Axillary Node Dissection* (Patient Education, Moffitt Cancer Center)

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