

Breast Care Department

01744 646053

Sentinel

Lymph Node Biopsy

Patient information leaflet

This leaflet can be made available in alternative languages/formats on request.

**St Helens Hospital
Marshalls Cross Road
St Helens WA9 3DA**

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Produced by – Breast Care Team

What is the Sentinel Node (SN)?

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

Reasons for the procedure

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

Recent studies have shown that removal of the sentinel lymph node is just as safe and accurate as traditional armpit surgery, which involves removing more lymph nodes. However after sentinel lymph node biopsy, it will be necessary for about 20-25 per cent of women to go on to have more of the lymph nodes in the armpit removed. (Auxiliary Clearance.)

Nature of the procedure

Finding the SN

Before surgery a small amount of radioactive fluid will be injected under the skin of your breast.

During surgery a blue dye will be injected into the breast. This also travels to the SN. The surgeon, using a special radiation detection probe, can then find the SN which is also stained blue.

Space for your notes

Further help and information

Macmillan Cancer Support:-

Email : cancerline@macmillan.org.uk

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Breast Cancer Care:-

www.breastcancer.org.uk

Macmillan Breast Cancer Nurse Specialists at St Helens & Knowsley Teaching Hospitals, on:

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- **What if we cannot find the Sentinel Nodes?**
Occasionally it is not possible to find the SN. The possibility of this would have been discussed with you by your surgeon, before your surgery.

If this happens, the surgeon, during the same operation, will remove a group lymph nodes to make sure the node likely to be SN is removed. However, this will be discussed with you prior to your operation and your consent will be taken before your surgery.

- **What if the SN looks cancerous at Surgery?**
Occasionally, at the time of surgery, the sentinel node can look suspicious that it is cancerous. The surgeon may proceed to remove all the nodes that appear suspicious. This will save you a second armpit operation a few weeks later. This is not common.

After Surgery

The pathologist examines the SN under the microscope; this takes a couple of weeks. If the SN contains cancer cells, it is possible further cancerous nodes are still present in the armpit. For this reason you will require either further armpit surgery to remove as many of the remaining lymph nodes as possible, or you may be offered radiotherapy to the armpit.

Before the operation you will need to sign consent forms

- To have sentinel lymph nodes biopsy using radioactive fluid and blue dye.

- If the pathologist finds the sentinel lymph node/nodes contain cancer, you may need a second operation to your armpit to remove more lymph nodes, or the option of radiotherapy to treat
- If the surgeon cannot find the SN or the glands look cancerous we need your permission to remove more nodes, during this operation.

**If you do not want this to happen
you must tell us**

Benefits of the procedure

- Less discomfort and more early mobility in the shoulder arm.
- Less risk of lymphoedema (swelling of the arm).
For more information regarding lymphoedema, please see Breast Cancer Care leaflet 'Reducing the risk of lymphoedema'.
- Wound drains are not usually necessary.
- Shorter hospital stay and quicker overall recovery.

Risks of the procedure

- Blue dye will cause facial bluish discoloration and discolour urine, stool and tears (please remove contacts lenses before surgery) for a few days. The breast skin will be discoloured for up to a few months and very occasionally a year or so.

Potential risks

- **Allergic reaction** to the radioactive or blue dye is rare and can be treated if occurs.
- Injection of radioactive drug under the skin of your breast may give slight discomfort.

Alternatives to Sentinel Lymph Node biopsy

Traditional armpit surgery; whereby more lymph nodes are removed rather than just the sentinel lymph nodes where usually 1-2 nodes are removed.

Consequences of not having the procedure

It is important for your doctor to find out whether the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes in your armpit, because this will influence your further treatments. Without checking the lymph nodes in your armpit we may not be able to advise you about the stage of your cancer, or best types of treatment for you.

If you do not want to have sentinel lymph nodes biopsy, you will be advised, auxiliary lymph node clearance.