

## Patient information

# General advice and potential problems following axillary surgery

## Lymphoedema

Some lymph glands have been removed from your armpit, which could give you an increased risk of developing lymphoedema (swelling) in that arm. Lymphoedema is caused when the lymph fluid cannot drain from the arm/breast in the usual way. The fluid builds up between the tissue and causes swelling. Lymphoedema is a chronic condition that can be treated and maintained but not cured. Swelling can be reduced in most people, particularly when diagnosed early. If you become concerned or need further advice on arm swelling, please contact your Breast Care Nurse as soon as possible. If necessary you can be referred to a Lymphoedema Specialist for further advice and treatment. Contact the BCN's if:

- Swelling of the arm that does not reduce overnight
- Heaviness in the arm

The following guidelines are recommendations to help reduce your risk of developing lymphoedema and should be maintained in the future:

- Exercise and movement are good for encouraging lymph flow provided it is increased gradually.
- Ensure that you do not have blood tests, injections or vaccinations in your arm that has had surgery.
- Ensure that gloves are worn during activity where there is risk of skin breakage or abrasion e.g. gardening.
- You have an increased risk of infection in that arm, so if you are cut, scratched, burnt or bitten, ensure that injuries are cleaned with antiseptic. If it does not heal

as you would expect, see your GP.

- Keep the skin clean and moisturise regularly.
- Use a high factor sunscreen.
- If your arm becomes red, hot, painful or swollen, contact your GP.
- Maintain a healthy diet and weight.

## **Potential problems following axillary node surgery**

It is not uncommon to have a number of problems with your arm following surgery to remove glands from the armpit.

**Pain:** Usually because you have a wound - take regular analgesia and do exercises provided.

**Change in sensation:** The nerves (in your armpit) have been disturbed. This may cause loss of or reduced sensation, numbness, weakness, sensitivity, burning or tingling.

**Cording:** This feels like a tight cord running down your arm to your hand. This is caused by inflamed tendons or lymph vessels and will resolve. Try anti-inflammatory and analgesia medications and continue with exercises.

**Nerve pain:** This usually settles, but in a few women may be severe and last some time. Speak to a Breast Care Nurse, as there are some medications that can help.

**Swelling:** This is common and should lessen after a few weeks.

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