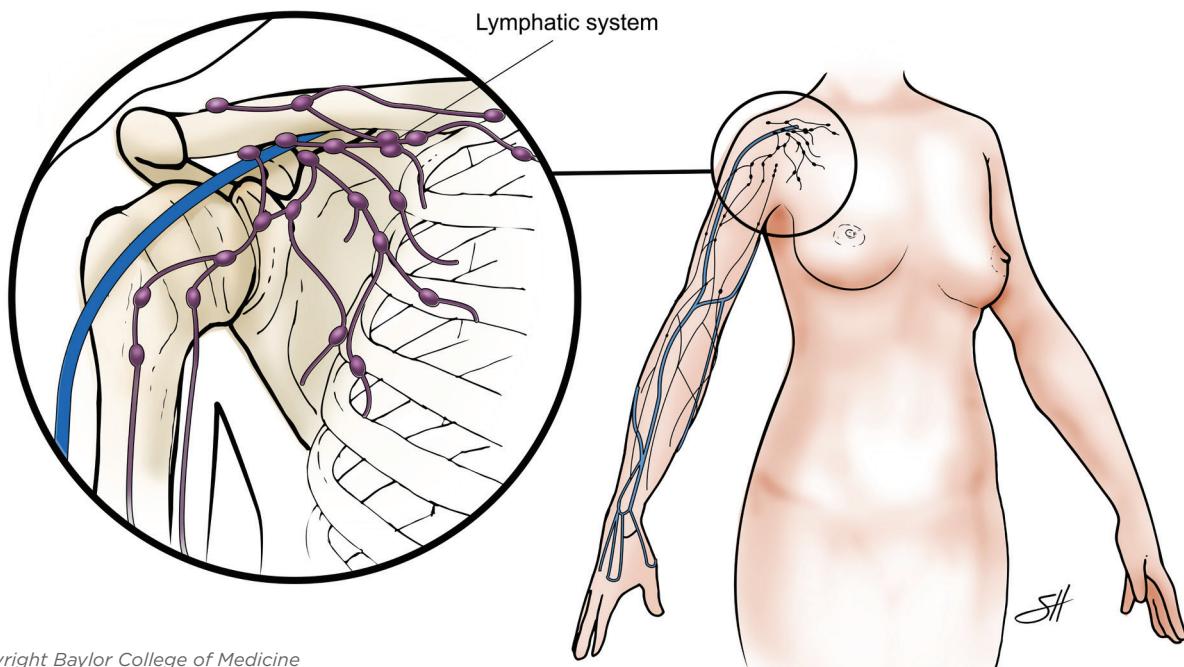


## AXILLARY LYMPH NODE DISSECTION

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Part of your body's immune system is the lymph (or lymphatic) system. It is made up of lymph vessels and lymph nodes that form a network. Lymph vessels are like veins, but instead of carrying blood throughout the body, these vessels carry lymph, which is a clear, watery fluid. White blood cells, which help the body fight off infections, are also found in lymph fluid.

Cancer can spread from where it started (called the primary site) and travel to other parts of the body. When cancer cells break away from a tumor, they can move to other parts of the body through the bloodstream or the lymph system. Most of the cancer cells that move away from the tumor die or are killed before they can start growing again. But one or two could move to a new place, start growing and make new tumors.

When cancer spreads to lymph nodes, it usually goes to lymph nodes closest to the tumor. In breast cancer, the closest lymph nodes are under the armpit and these are called axillary lymph nodes. Surgery to remove these cancerous lymph nodes from the armpit is called axillary lymph node dissection (ALND).

## **During Surgery**

- You will be given anesthesia, so you will be asleep and pain-free.
- You will receive fluids and other medicines during the surgery through an intravenous line (IV).
- A tube will be placed down your throat to help you breathe during the surgery. This will usually be removed before you wake up.
- Your surgeon will make an incision beneath the arm and remove most of the lymph nodes in that region.
- A surgical drain will be placed under the arm on the side of the operation to remove fluid while you recover.

# **After Surgery**

## **Recovery - What to Expect**

You may feel weak right after surgery. You should move your arm and shoulder frequently to avoid it getting stiff. Your surgeon will give you some arm exercises to help with soreness and mobility. This will be in a separate handout.

After this surgery, you are at risk for arm swelling and change of sensation. You may feel numbness or tingling down the back of your arm for several weeks after surgery. If you feel the symptoms are worsening or not improving, please contact your surgeon's office.

You'll have a scar under your arm that will fade over time. You may notice that your armpit feels hollow or you may feel like you have a lump under your armpit. The lump is called a seroma, or collection of fluid and will decrease in size over time. If you feel the lump is increasing in size, or becomes hot and red, please contact your surgeon's office.

## **Activity**

- If your surgeon discussed doing arm exercises after surgery, please refer to the other packet given to you.
- Try walking every day. Start by walking a bit more than you did the day before, gradually increasing the amount of time you walk. Walking increases blood flow and helps keep you from getting pneumonia and constipation.
- Avoid high impact activities and activities that require you to lift more than 10 pounds until approved by your surgeon.
- Ask your surgeon when you can start driving again. If you have a surgical drain in place, you cannot drive until the drain is removed.
- Due to the risk of swelling in your arm (lymphedema), please be careful when gardening, cleaning up broken glass, or anything that could cause cuts on the arm where you had surgery. If you notice any cuts or swelling on that arm, please contact your surgeon's office.

## **Work**

In two to six weeks, you should be able to go back to work or your normal routine.

If you need FMLA paperwork completed or a letter to return to work, please contact your surgeon's office to discuss as soon as possible. Please allow one week to get these documents completed.

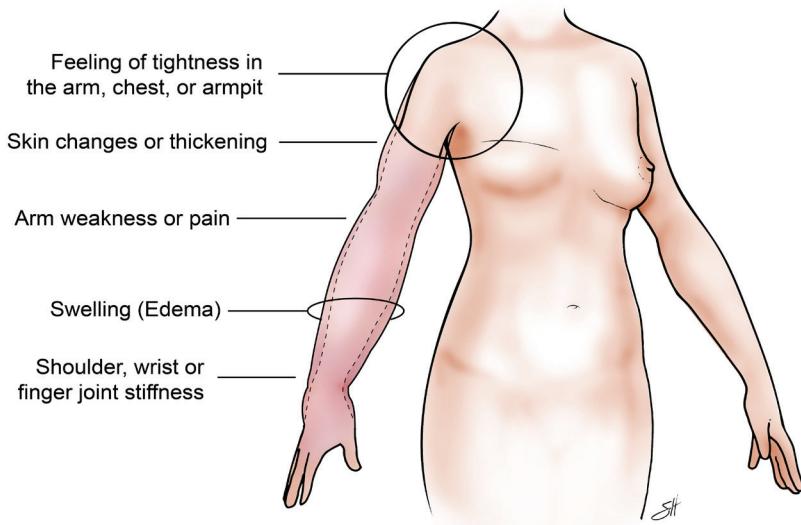
## **Incision Site**

- The incision is covered with Steri-Strips (a paper tape with adhesive backing) or surgical glue. Allow the strips or glue to fall off on their own.
- Keep the incision site dry and clean.
- Inspect the incision site every day for increased redness, drainage, swelling or separation of the skin.
- You may shower 24 hours after surgery. You may wash the incision site with soap and water and pat dry. Avoid scrubbing the incision.

## Drain Care

Please refer to the separate handout regarding your drain care.

## Lymphedema signs and symptoms



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## Follow-up

Your follow-up appointment will be scheduled and communicated to you before you are discharged. It will be set up for two weeks after your surgery—the time it takes to receive the final pathology report, which helps determine next steps. Your surgeon will review your pathology report with you at your post-operative visit.

## Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following symptoms:



- Any chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Rapid, irregular heartbeat
- Worsening abdominal pain
- Any unusual bleeding
- Fever of 101°F or higher, or chills
- Signs of infection around the incision (redness, drainage, warmth or pain)
- Incision that opens or pulls apart
- Persistent nausea or diarrhea
- Trouble concentrating
- Dizziness or lightheadedness



MyChart is a great way to get in touch with your surgery team by sending secure messages. You may also attach photos if you have concerns about your incision site. If you do not have Baylor MyChart, call the office and the staff will assist you in setting it up.

If you have an urgent surgical concern after hours, please call the office number. The answering service will connect you with the on-call surgeon.

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