



CERVICAL NODE BIOPSY

GENERAL INFORMATION

The whole body is fitted out with a huge number of microscopic channels that drain fluid called lymph. These channels pass through lymph nodes, whose function it is to filter out and trap bacteria, viruses, white blood cells, cancer cells and other foreign particles in the lymph. When the lymph nodes trap a lot of material, they swell. Sometimes they swell simply as part of their job in helping the body fight off an infection. The lymph nodes are more concentrated in certain areas, for example the neck.

It is sometimes difficult to know the cause of swelling of lymph nodes. In such situations, a portion or all of the lymph node needs to be removed. This is called a LYMPH NODE BIOPSY.

COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- The enlarged lymph node can be as small as a pea or as large as a walnut. Only one node may be felt, or there may be many. They may be separate or stuck together.
- Usually they do not hurt, or they may just ache a bit.
- The surest way to be certain of the nature of the lymph node is to remove a piece of it for examination in the laboratory. However, there are a number of considerations on whether a biopsy is necessary or advisable.
- The lymph nodes may not truly be enlarged. The person may be thin enough that normal, small nodes can be felt.
- If the cause of the enlargement is clear and not a serious one, the proper first step is to treat the cause (for example an infection) expecting the lymph node to get smaller.
- Sometimes the specific cause of the lymph node swelling is not clear to the doctor, but the possible causes are not alarming. In such cases, it may be reasonable to simply observe the patient for several weeks or several months.
- The diagnosis may not be clear, but there may be serious harm in waiting and watching to see what happens. In such a case, a biopsy is warranted.
- The diagnosis may be quite obvious. However the treatment for the presumed disease is extensive and carries some risk. It would not be correct to start treatment without first knowing the exact diagnosis through a biopsy.

PRE-OPERATIVE PREPARATION

- Don't drink or eat anything for 6 hours before the operation.
- Your doctor will decide when you need to be admitted to hospital.
- You may be given medicine to make you drowsy before being taken to the theatre.
- Make sure your doctor knows what medicines you take, especially medicines which may affect blood clotting.

OPERATION

- Your doctor may decide to do the biopsy under local anaesthetic or under general anaesthetic.
- An incision is made over the enlarged lymph node. It is dissected out.

POST-OPERATIVE CARE

- You will be taken to a recovery room where you will stay until your blood pressure, pulse and breathing are stable and you are completely alert. You should be able to go home the same day with a responsible adult.
- Arrangements will be made regarding the removal of your stitches.

COMPLICATIONS

1. Complications are not common after a cervical node biopsy but you must be aware of the following possible complications.
2. A bleed or haematoma at the site of a lymph node biopsy may rarely occur. Depending on the extent of this bleed, your doctor will decide whether you need to be taken back to the operating theatre.
3. The wound of a cervical node biopsy rarely becomes infected. If this happens, it may necessitate dressings or other active management.
4. The scar after this operation is usually quite satisfactory, but some patients may end up with an unattractive scar.
5. Some very important nerves run through the neck on the way to the shoulder and arm. It is very rare for them to be injured. You must however be aware of the fact that these nerves may be injured with significant repercussions for arm and shoulder function.
6. Systemic complications like venous thrombosis and pulmonary embolism are rare but possible after any operation or anaesthetic.

