

## Understanding Neck Dissection

- **What it is:** A neck dissection is a surgical procedure to remove lymph nodes in the neck. Lymph nodes are small, bean-shaped structures that are part of the immune system.
- **Different Types:** There are different types of neck dissection, each used for different reasons. Your surgeon will discuss with you the details of the operation you are having. Here's a brief overview:
  - **Radical Neck Dissection:** Aims to remove most lymph nodes in the neck between the jaw and collarbones. This may be necessary if several lymph nodes are affected, especially if they are large. It involves removing some surrounding tissues along with the nodes.
  - **Selective Neck Dissection:** Removes specific groups of lymph nodes most likely to be affected by your type of cancer. This is often the procedure when there is less disease in the neck, or a suspicion of early spread.
- **Reasons for the Procedure:** Your doctor may recommend a neck dissection if you have:
  - Cancer of the Mouth, Throat, or Skin: To check for the spread of cancer and remove any affected lymph nodes.
  - Cancer of Unknown Origin: To help find the primary source of the cancer.

## Potential Benefits of Neck Dissection

- **Addressing Cancer Spread:** Removes affected lymph nodes to help control the spread of cancer and improve treatment outcomes.
- **Diagnostic Information:** Helps determine the stage of cancer, guiding further treatment decisions.

## What to Expect from the Operation

- **Collaboration with Your Surgeon:** Your surgeon will explain the specific details of your neck dissection, including the type and any other procedures you may need at the same time.
- **General Anaesthesia:** The operation is performed under general anesthesia, meaning you'll be asleep throughout.
- **Incisions:** The surgeon will make one or two long cuts in the neck to access the lymph nodes.
- **After the Operation:**

- **Drains and Stitches:** You'll have temporary drain tubes and stitches or clips to close the wounds.
- **Numbness of Skin:** It's common to experience numbness in the neck area after surgery, which usually improves over time.
- **Potential Stiffness:** You may have some neck stiffness, and your surgeon and care team can advise on exercises and physiotherapy if needed.

## Important Considerations

- **Risks of Surgery:** Like any surgery, a neck dissection has potential risks. It's crucial to discuss these thoroughly with your surgeon. These may include:
  - **General Risks:**
    - Bleeding
    - Infection
  - **Specific Risks:**
    - **Shoulder Weakness (if accessory nerve is affected):** May cause difficulty in shoulder movement.
    - **Numbness (often temporary, but can occasionally be permanent):** Reduced sensation in the neck, below the jaw, or ear.
    - **Changes in Facial Appearance:** Some contour changes in your neck due to the surgery.
    - **Swelling (Lymphedema):** A rare build-up of fluid in the neck and face.
    - **Damage to the Marginal Mandibular Nerve:** Can affect lower lip muscles, causing temporary or less commonly permanent weakness.
    - **Damage to the Hypoglossal Nerve:** Can affect tongue movement, causing temporary or in rare cases permanent difficulties with speech and swallowing.
    - **Chyle Leak:** Leakage of a milky fluid from the lymphatic system, generally requiring further management.
    - **Horner's Syndrome:** A rare complication causing drooping eyelids and constriction of the pupil.
    - **Seroma:** A collection of fluid under the skin, which might need to be drained.
- **Individual Experiences:** The extent of side effects will vary from person to person. Your healthcare team will support you throughout your recovery.

## Preparing for Your Neck Dissection

- **Pre-Surgery Consultation:** You'll have a detailed discussion with your surgeon about the procedure, risks, benefits, alternative options, and your specific medical history.

- **Medications:** Your doctor will advise on any adjustments to your regular medications before surgery.
- **Fasting:** You'll be asked to fast (no food or certain drinks) for a specific time before surgery.
- **Questions:** Prepare a list of questions you have – no concern is too small!

## What to Expect on the Day of Surgery

- **Arrival at the Hospital:** When you arrive, you'll be asked to check in and provide any necessary information.
- **Preparation:** A nurse will review your medical history, take your vital signs, and may start an IV (intravenous line) for fluids and medication.
- **Meeting Your Team:** You'll likely meet your surgeon, anaesthetist, and other healthcare professionals involved in your care.

## The Surgery

- **Operating Room:** You'll be taken to the operating room and prepared for surgery.
- **Anaesthesia:** The anaesthetist will administer general anaesthesia, so you'll be asleep during the procedure.
- **The Neck Dissection Procedure:**
  - Incision
  - Identification and removal of affected lymph nodes
  - Additional procedures as needed (may be done at the same time)
  - Closing the incision

## Recovery After Surgery

- **Post-Surgery Ward:** You'll wake up in a recovery area where nurses will monitor your condition.
- **Pain and Discomfort:** You may experience some pain, swelling, and discomfort in the surgical area. Pain medication will be available.
- **Eating and Drinking:** You'll likely start with liquids and soft foods.
- **Discharge from the Hospital:** You may need to stay in the hospital for a few days. Detailed instructions for wound care, medications, activity restrictions, and follow-up appointments will be provided

## Where to Find Further Information

- **Your Surgeon:** Your primary source for reliable information.

- **Relevant Charities/Support Groups:** Your surgeon may suggest these for additional information and support.

## **Who to Contact with Questions**

- **Surgeon:** Your primary contact for any questions.
- **GP (General Practitioner):** Can help with initial questions and referrals.

## Introduction

This leaflet provides guidance for your recovery after a neck dissection. This surgery is often done to remove cancerous lymph nodes in the neck. Your body needs time to heal, and everyone recovers at a different pace. This information will help you understand the recovery process, including diet, medication, wound care, exercises, and returning to your usual routine.

## Diet and Swallowing

You may find swallowing or chewing difficult, especially in the first few weeks after surgery. Start with liquids and gradually progress to soft foods like yogurt, mashed potatoes, and scrambled eggs. Avoid hard or scratchy foods until your throat and mouth feel comfortable.

A healthy, balanced diet is important for optimal healing. Your doctor or a dietician may recommend nutritional supplements to support your recovery.

Constipation is common after surgery. Increase your intake of high-fibre foods and drink plenty of fluids. If constipation persists, ask your pharmacist or doctor for a gentle laxative.

## Medication

- **Pain Relief:** You will likely be prescribed pain medication. Take it as directed and be aware of potential side effects. Don't drive or operate heavy machinery while taking strong pain medication.
- **Antibiotics:** You may be prescribed antibiotics to prevent infection. Take them as directed for the full course, even if you start to feel better.
- **Other Medications:** Your doctor may prescribe other medications based on your specific condition and surgical findings.

## When to Go to A&E (Accident & Emergency)

Seek immediate medical attention if you experience any of the following:

- Severe neck swelling or difficulty breathing
- Fever (temperature of 38°C or higher)
- New numbness and tingling around your mouth or in your hands and feet

- Signs of infection around your wound: Increased pain, redness, swelling, or foul-smelling discharge
- Severe or persistent nausea or vomiting

## Caring for Your Wound and Scar

Your wound may be closed with stitches, staples, or special skin glue. Follow your surgeon's specific instructions for wound care. This may include:

- Keeping the area clean and dry
- Changing dressings as directed
- Avoiding bathing, swimming, or submerging your wound until your surgeon says it is safe

## Neck and Shoulders Exercises

Gentle neck and shoulder exercises are essential for restoring range of motion and preventing stiffness. Your surgeon or a physical therapist will provide specific instructions. Generally:

- Start exercises the day after surgery, or as soon as your surgeon advises.
- Perform them slowly and gently 2-3 times daily.
- It's normal to feel some discomfort, but stop if you experience significant pain.

## Activity

- **Rest:** Get plenty of rest in the first few weeks.
- **Light Activity:** Start with short walks and gradually increase activity as you feel stronger.
- **Lifting Restrictions:** Avoid heavy lifting (generally over 10lbs) for the first few weeks, as directed by your surgeon.
- **Driving:** Do not drive until you have good head and neck mobility and are not taking strong pain medications.

## Returning to Your Routine

- **Going Back to Work:** The timeline for returning to work varies. Discuss this with your surgeon.

- **Emotional Support:** Recovery can be emotionally challenging. Reach out to family, friends, or a support group for help.
- **Follow-up Care:** Be sure to attend all your follow-up appointments.

**We're Here For You!** Your healthcare team is dedicated to supporting you throughout your recovery.