

Excision biopsy for suspected skin cancer

Department of BESS Surgery [Patient information](#)

This is a guide for anyone having an excision biopsy for suspected skin cancer.

What is an excision biopsy?

It is a surgery performed under a local or general anaesthetic. A local anaesthetic is an injection which numbs the skin. This is done while you are awake. A general anaesthetic makes you sleep. Your surgeon will remove the area of unusual skin with some surrounding normal skin tissue.

What does an excision biopsy involve?

Your surgeon will cut around the skin lesion and then remove it. You will have your wound closed with stitches. The surgery takes 30-60 minutes.

Why do you need an excision biopsy?

This will let us diagnose (tell us what it is) your skin lesion.

What are the aims and benefits of an excision biopsy?

A diagnosis will tell us whether you need any further treatment.

What will happen before the surgery?

You will come to a pre-assessment clinic where you will:

- be asked about any health conditions and tablets you are taking
- have your weight and blood pressure checked
- be screened for risks of infection and blood clots
- have blood tests and may have an ECG (heart tracing) and x-ray
- be told where/when to come on your day of surgery.
- be advised when to stop eating and drinking.

What will happen on the day of the surgery?

Make your way to the surgical unit in your appointment letter. Your nurse will admit you and your surgeon will meet with you. This is a good time to ask any last questions you may have.

What will happen after the surgery?

You will return to the ward. If you have a drip (a small needle in your arm attached to a bag to give you fluids into the vein) we will remove this. Please ask for pain relief if you have any discomfort. You will go home on the day of your surgery. Please arrange for someone to collect you. You will get an outpatient appointment in the post to see your surgeon. This will be 2-4 weeks after the surgery to discuss your results.

What will happen to the wound and dressings after the surgery?

Dressings should stay in place until you have your stitches removed. You can ask your practice nurse to change it sooner if you need. Your surgeon will tell you if your stitches need removing. Make an appointment with your practice nurse to have these removed after 14 days. Please make the appointment as soon as possible after your surgery.

What are the possible risks of an excision biopsy?

All operations have a small risk of side effects. The following diagram may help you decide how you feel about risk:

People vary in how they interpret words and numbers.

This scale is provided to help.



*Royal College of Anaesthetists 2024

Very common and common side effects (1 in 10 or 1 in 100 people):

Infection

Signs of infection include a fever, redness, or bad smell. Please let a member of the team know as you may need antibiotics.

Dehiscence (wound breakdown)

An area of your wound may break down and need regular dressings until it heals.

Seromas (tissue fluid) and haematomas (bleeding)

Tissue fluid and blood can collect within the wound. We may need to remove it using a needle and syringe. Very rarely you may need further surgery to stop the fluid/bleeding and remove this.

Scarring

This surgery will leave a scar. This should settle over time. Once it's healed rubbing Vaseline or vitamin E cream in may help.

Nerve pain

Tingling and/or stabbing pains are common after this type of surgery. Keep on taking analgesia (painkillers) as prescribed. This should settle over time.

Uncommon side effects

(1 in 1000 people):

Lost or decreased feeling

We cut some of your minor sensory nerves during surgery. This may make the area around your wound feel numb. For most the loss of feeling should be temporary. For some patients it may last longer.

Rare or very rare side effects

(1 in 10,000 or 1 in 100,000):

Blood clots in the limbs (DVT) and lungs (PE)

Blood clots are a risk with all general anaesthetic surgeries. If you have a higher risk we will take special precautions. This may include wearing stockings. Moving around after the surgery will help to stop clots forming.

What can you do when you get home?

Washing

Avoid soaking your wound in the bath as this increases the risk of infection. A strip wash or shower is best. Make sure to completely dry the area after bathing.

Work/general life

You can go back to work when your wound has healed. This normally takes two weeks. If your job involves heavy lifting, you may need to take longer. You will get a sick note on discharge. You should be able to resume a normal lifestyle within 4-6 weeks.

Sport

You should not start any strenuous exercise for 8-12 weeks after your surgery. This could break open your wound. Your surgeon will let you know when it is safe to do so.

Driving

You cannot drive for 24 hours after surgery. Ideally you should avoid driving for 2-3 weeks. Only drive if you feel confident and can make an emergency stop. If in doubt, seek medical advice or check with your insurance company.

When do you get the results of the excision biopsy?

You will get an outpatient appointment for around 2-4 weeks after your surgery. We will check your wound and give you the results from your surgery. We will let you know if you need any more treatment.

Consent

We must take your written consent to this surgery by law. We will explain all the risks and benefits. Please do not hesitate to ask us any questions.

Contact details

If you have any queries please contact your consultant skin surgeon, skin cancer nurse specialists, or skin cancer advanced nurse practitioner.

Consultant skin surgeons:

Your consultant's secretary can be contacted on the following numbers:

Mr Perry: 0300 019 4870

Miss Clark: 0300 019 2616

Miss Pearce: 0300 019 2600

Skin cancer nurse specialists: 0300 019 5205

Skin cancer administrator: 0300 019 5465

Skin cancer advanced nurse practitioner: 0300 019 8073

***The above contacts should be available Monday-Friday, 8-4pm. Evenings and weekends please phone your district nurse, 111 or go to the Emergency Department in an emergency.**

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