

Lymph Node Biopsy: Patient Information

What is a lymph node?

Lymph nodes are sometimes referred to as lymph 'glands'. They are small, oval shaped organs that are found throughout your body. There are lymph nodes in your neck, armpits and groin, and there are also nodes deep in your chest, abdomen and pelvis. Lymph nodes form part of your immune system and help your body to recognise and fight infections and other diseases. When lymph nodes are actively fighting a disease such as an infection they can become enlarged. After the infection is resolved, the nodes usually return to normal size.

If your lymph nodes have increased in size and then remain enlarged, your doctor may order a lymph node biopsy to look for reasons for persistently swollen nodes, including ongoing infection, inflammation or cancer.

What is involved in a Lymph Node Biopsy?

A lymph node biopsy is usually done as an outpatient procedure, either in a doctor's surgery, or in a hospital either in the Xray Department, or in the operating theatre. The idea is to take a sample of the lymph node (either a few cells, a core of tissue or the whole lymph node) and send it to the laboratory for analysis.

There are three ways to perform a lymph node biopsy.

Needle Biopsy

This is a quick, 10 minute procedure. You lie on an examination couch and the doctor cleans the biopsy site and administers local anaesthetic to the area to make it numb. The doctor then inserts a needle into the node and removes a small sample. The needle is removed and you have a small bandage over the area.

Core Biopsy

This is also a quick procedure and is usually done with the help of Ultrasound or CT guidance in the Xray department of the hospital. The Radiology Doctor uses the images from the scan to guide where to place the needle. Local anaesthetic is applied and then the doctor inserts a slightly wider needle into the node to obtain some solid cores of tissue. Sometimes a spring-loaded device is used to insert the needle and you may feel and hear the click of the device being used. A few cores are usually taken and then you are discharged with a bandage over the area.

Open Biopsy

In this procedure either a portion of your lymph node or the entire lymph node is removed by a surgeon. Sometimes an open biopsy is done with local anesthesia, using a numbing medication applied to the biopsy site. At other times, it can be done under general anaesthesia in order to sleep through the procedure.

An open biopsy takes between 30 and 45 minutes. The surgeon puts in some local anaesthetic, and then makes a small cut to remove the lymph node. The cut is then stitched closed, and a bandage applied.

Will it hurt?

Pain after a lymph node biopsy is usually mild, even after an open biopsy. We may recommend over-the-counter pain medications such as paracetamol with or without codeine. For open biopsies, it takes 10 to 14 days for the incision to heal. You should avoid strenuous activity and exercise while your incision heals.

How do I prepare for my lymph node biopsy?

If you are having sedation or a general anaesthetic, you may need to fast. Speak to the person booking your biopsy appointment to find out if you can fast, and if so, from what time. Also find out if it is OK for you to take any usual medications prior to the procedure.

Bring a list of any medications that you are taking. This includes non-prescription medications and supplements. Be careful to check about aspirin, other blood thinners and anti-inflammatory medications with your doctor, well in advance of the procedure.

Bring a list of any allergies to medication, latex allergies

Tell the doctor about pregnancies, or bleeding disorders.

What are the risks of Lymph Node Biopsy?

The risks of a needle biopsy are very small, but the risks increase if this is to be a surgical procedure. Risks from a lymph node biopsy include:

- tenderness around the biopsy site – this is not uncommon but is usually mild, and should respond to simple pain relief.
- infection – this is rare and can be treated with antibiotics. Watch for redness, swelling or pus at the site.



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- bleeding – some bruising and slight ooze from the wound is not uncommon. Watch for excessive bruising or extensive bleeding that does not resolve with simple pressure. This is rare but may require further medical attention if it occurs.
- numbness due to nerve damage – this is rare, but numbness can occur if there are nerves close to the biopsy site. Any numbness normally disappears within a couple of months.

How will I feel after my Lymph Node Biopsy?

You may have some pain and tenderness can last for a few days after the biopsy. Make sure you keep the biopsy site clean and dry at all times. You may be asked to avoid showers or baths for a couple of days after surgery. Additionally monitor the biopsy site and your physical condition after surgery. Call your doctor if you show signs of an infection or complications, including:

- fever
- chills
- swelling
- intense pain
- bleeding or discharge from the biopsy site

When will the results of my Biopsy be ready?

Test results are usually ready within three to seven days. You will need a follow up appointment to receive these results and discuss their meaning with your doctor.