Postoperative Instructions for Sentinel Node Biopsy, Possible Axillary Dissection

Thank you for choosing Catholic Health as your healthcare provider. These are instructions to follow after your Sentinel Node Biopsy and possible axillary dissection. This procedure is usually combined with either a mastectomy or lumpectomy so see those discharge instructions as well.

As you were advised before surgery, the sentinel node biopsy is done to detect if there is any cancer in the lymph nodes. A sentinel lymph node is the first lymph node(s) to which cancer is most likely to spread from a primary tumor. A small group of lymph nodes is usually removed. The pathologist working with your doctor examined the nodes during surgery to determine if the doctor needed to remove more lymph nodes (axillary dissection) and thus created a deeper and larger incision. These instructions are for the incision related to removing the sentinel nodes/performing dissection.

Care of the Incision(s)

Your incision, or scar, will be located on the side where the breast tumor has been located, towards the underarm. It will be covered with steri-strips, which are small white strips of tape that will gradually come off/fall off as you bathe, or they will be removed at your postoperative visit.

- Please wait 48 hours to take a shower or to bathe unless a drain is present, in which case you may shower once the drain is removed.
- On the first day home from surgery, watch your dressings for any increased bleeding.
- Do not remove steri-strips. Do not cover or put ointment/lotions on the incisions. If gauze dressings were used, it is OK to remove the outer gauze dressings after 48 hours and leave the incision open to air.
- If you have had an axillary dissection, the incision may be larger and at time, feel as though you have a mass or a ball under your arm. This is called a seroma. This pocket of fluid may build up under your arm and this is normal and will subside. However, if the pocket of fluid is extremely uncomfortable, we can drain the fluid at your doctor’s office at the time of your postoperative visit.
- Do not shave under your arm for 10-14 days.
- Please check with your doctor before using deodorant under the affected arm as well.
- You can expect numbness, tingling in the underarm and upper part of your arm. This is normal.

*If you have had breast reconstruction following a mastectomy, please follow the instructions following that procedure, as you may have drains as well as the incision to take care of.*