

What is a skin biopsy?

A skin biopsy is an operation to take a piece of skin for testing in a pathology laboratory to get to a diagnosis.

You might have come for a consultation appointment when the dermatologist decides it would be best to do a biopsy: this maybe done straightaway or another day.

On the day you will be asked for your **consent** to carry out the skin biopsy. The procedure involves giving a local anaesthetic to numb the skin; initially the local anaesthetic stings but it wears off quickly and causes numbness to the injected area, this numbness wears off in 1-2 hours, after which you may take paracetamol if it hurts, most people seldom need any. Local anaesthetics blunt the pain sensation but you will still be able to feel touch, pulling when stitching, etcetra, this may seem strange but is not painful or uncomfortable. Local anaesthetics are used in dental procedures and if have had an adverse reaction to a local anaesthetic, plasters or iodine used to cleanse the skin please inform the doctor or nurse well ahead. Local anaesthetics are safe and do not carry the complications with general anaesthesia. Dermatologists seldom do general anaesthetic procedures.

If you are under 16 years of age your parents or guardian may need to sign the consent and you too can sign alongside but parental consent is necessary. At the time of consent you may ask relevant questions before the surgery starts.

Before the operation:

If you have young children please bring someone to look after them; hospital staff may not be able to look after children; also young children and accompanying people are not allowed into the operating room or operation theatre. This minimises risk of infection & distractions.

Are you on medicines : warfarin, aspirin, anticoagulants as apixaban, dabigatran? Anti-hypertensives, antiepileptics? What is your latest INR in the anticoagulant clinic?

Do you have hypertension? In which please get checked at your doctor's surgery as we may not do the operation if your BP is high.

Do you have a **pacemaker or an intracardiac defibrillator**? Please check with your cardiologist ahead.

Are you able to lie on the bed as comfortably as you can till the procedure is completed? Do you have a bad back problem? Do you have any physical disability, do you need a hoist?

Are you a gym enthusiast: you will need to rest till wound healing is good otherwise the stitches will break open! Cycling, running, physically active holidays as climbing, swimming, surfing may need postponing for a couple of weeks.

Can you eat before the operation ? Yes you can but do not have a heavy meal and certainly do not starve either as you would for general anaesthesia.

Clothing: wear something comfortable and easy to remove where needed. If its on your foot then please get suitable footwear. Please avoid bringing jewellery and valuables.

The Operation Procedure

Duration: Simple biopsy takes 15-20 minutes but if it's a bigger lesion which needs to be removed in full it may take an hour.

The procedure itself consists of cutting a piece of skin and sending off for testing. There is a risk of infection, bleeding and scarring. There is no such thing as scarless surgery. Also scars take time to evolve and heal, the process can take 6-12 months. Immediately after surgery the operation site can look bruised and swollen but time is the great healer and everything settles down with time. The ultimate objective is to produce as neat a scar as possible. Some areas as the upper chest and shoulder areas tend to scar less nicely and ones on the back tend to stretch.

Sometimes only a small piece of skin is needed and this is called **diagnostic biopsy**: sometimes if it's a dark mole or basal cell carcinoma the whole lesion may need to be removed: an **excision biopsy**. There will be bleeding, this is usually sealed with a buzzing cautery. Sometimes a wound may be difficult to just stitch and the dermatologist may use a tiny skin graft or flap, basically moving skin around to close the wound.

Wound care: After the operation general advice is to keep the wound area clean and dry; no water should enter the wound area for 5 days. Dressings are applied but they are not 100% water proof so you need to take care yourself. Some people cover the area with a plastic bag and you may choose how or what to do. At the end of 5 days you may remove the dressings and apply savlon antiseptic cream or Vaseline to the wound area for 7-14 days. Vaseline may be continued even longer, if there are scabs let them fall off naturally and do not pick the scabs as wounds heal better where scabs fall off naturally. Some sutures may be removed by your practice nurse or doctor; some people use silicon gel or Bio-oil, these may be used after sutures are removed. For some sutures you will be brought back to the department for a wound check. Some sutures are applied under the skin called subcuticular sutures, these will dissolve over as long as 6-10 months. Rarely some of these may spit out as the skin heals up and they can be removed easily by your surgery, if in doubt contact us. Please note the dermatology department is not open on weekends so if you get any problems you may need to attend minor injuries. Rarely there may be tiny bleeding, just apply pressure to the area for 20 minutes and if it still does not then you may take further steps if you are concerned.

The ultimate objective is to do the biopsy surgical procedure as simply as possible and make our encounter mutually pleasant with a nice outcome. We will do all we can to make your experience a nice one.

Follow up appointment: Your pathology report will be given, stitches if any may be removed. It could sometimes take 2-3 weeks to get the pathology report.

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