

# Treating Lymphedema with Vascularized Lymph Node Transfer

## *What to expect and how to prepare*

*This handout explains what to expect, how to prepare, and how to plan for your recovery from vascularized lymph node transfer surgery.*

### **What is lymphedema?**

*Lymphedema* is tissue swelling that occurs when lymph fluid cannot drain normally back into your blood.

### **What is vascularized lymph node transfer?**

*Vascularized lymph node transfer (VLNT)* is surgery to replace lymph nodes when they have been removed from an area of your body. Lymph nodes used for this transfer are called *donor nodes*. They may be taken from your groin, chest, or neck, or other areas where there are extra nodes.

After the donor nodes are placed, new lymph vessels will form around them.

### **How to Prepare for Your Surgery**

#### **1 Week Before**

- Starting 1 week before your surgery, do **not** take any aspirin or other products that affect blood clotting. Two of these are ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, and others) and naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn, and others).

#### **2 Days Before**

- Do not shave any part of your body that you do not already shave every day. If you normally shave near your surgical site, do **not** shave that area for 2 days (48 hours) before your surgery.



*Talk with your healthcare provider if you have any questions about your surgery.*

## 24 Hours Before

- **Shower:** Take a shower the night before your surgery.
  - Use the antibacterial soap your nurse gave you to wash your body from the neck down. Do **not** use the antibacterial soap on your face, hair, or private parts. (See directions that came with the soap.)
  - Use your own soap and shampoo on your face, hair, and private parts.
  - Use clean towels to dry off, and put on clean clothing.
- **When to arrive for surgery:** The pre-surgery nurse will call you by 5 p.m. the night before your surgery. If you are having surgery on a Monday, the nurse will call you the Friday before. If you do not hear from the nurse by 5 p.m., please call 206.598.6334.

The nurse will tell you when to come to the hospital and will remind you:

- Not to eat or drink after a certain time
- To have someone drive you home
- Which of your regular medicines to take or not take and to sip only enough water to swallow your pills

## Day of Surgery

### At Home

- **Shower:** Take another shower the morning of your surgery. Follow the same instructions as you did for your shower the night before surgery.
- **Do not eat or drink anything.** If the pre-surgery nurse told you to take any of your regular medicines, take them with only small sips of water.

### At the Hospital

- **Heating blanket:** While you wait to go into the operating room, we will cover you with a heating blanket to warm your body. This helps reduce your risk of infection. Please ask for a heating blanket if you do not receive one.

## What to Expect After Your Surgery

Plan to stay in the hospital at least 1 night after your surgery.

### Precautions and Self-care to Speed Your Recovery

- Medicine given during and after your surgery will affect you. **For 24 hours after your surgery, do not:**
  - Drive or travel alone

- Use machinery
- Drink alcohol
- Sign any legal papers or make important decisions
- Be responsible for the care of another person

### **Incision Care and Healing**

- You will have incisions:
  - At the donor site (where the lymph nodes were taken from)
  - At the site where the nodes were placed
- Your incisions will be closed with surgical glue and white tape called Steri-strips.
- In 48 hours, you may remove the outer dressings (bandages) and take a shower. You do not need to replace the dressings. Your incisions may stay open to the air.
- Do **not** take a bath, sit in a hot tub, or go swimming until all of your incisions are fully healed.

### **Drain Care**

- You will have a drain at the site where the lymph nodes were removed.
- You may also have a drain at the site where the lymph nodes were placed.
- When you go home, you will need to measure the amount of drainage. Your nurse will teach you how to do this before you leave the hospital. When you have less than 30 cc of drainage for 24 hours, 2 days in a row (for a total of 48 hours in a row), call your healthcare provider to see if the drain(s) can be removed.

### **Garments and Therapy**

- If you were wearing a compression garment before surgery, you may start wearing it again 4 weeks after your surgery.
- You may start physical therapy, massage, and using a compression pump 4 weeks after surgery. Keep doing the same therapies you were doing before surgery until your doctor tells you to change them.

### **Activity and Return to Work**

- For 2 to 4 weeks after surgery, avoid exercise or sports that increase your heart beat or make you breathe faster.
- Avoid activities or situations that may cause swelling.

- Do **not** fly for 2 weeks after surgery.
- Return to your usual activities slowly. Most people take 2 weeks off work to recover.
- **If you had lymph nodes moved to your leg:**
  - For 2 weeks after your surgery, stay off your leg as much as you can.
  - When you are seated or lying down, keep your leg raised above hip level as much as you can.

### **Pain Control**

To manage your pain, use extra-strength acetaminophen (Tylenol and other brands) as directed, or take the pain medicine your doctor prescribed for you.

### **Follow-up Visits**

- Your first follow-up visit will be 2 to 3 weeks after surgery.
- You will have other follow-up visits at 3 months, 6 months, and 1 year after surgery. We will check your progress at these visits.

### **When to Call**

Call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery or your doctor if you have:

- Bleeding or drainage that soaks your dressing
- A fever higher than 100.5°F (38°C)
- Chills or shaking
- Any sign of infection in your incision:
  - Redness
  - Increased pain
  - Increased swelling
  - Bad-smelling drainage
  - A change in the type or amount of drainage
- Nausea or vomiting
- Concerns that cannot wait until your follow-up visit

### **Questions?**

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217 and press 8.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the resident on call for Plastic Surgery to be paged.

Or, ask for your surgeon to be paged:

Dr. \_\_\_\_\_