

Welcome to the Breast Clinic

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please telephone the PALS desk on 01271 314090.

How long will I wait for an appointment

Guidance from the Department of Health says that all patients in England referred to a specialist with breast symptoms, even if cancer is not suspected, should be seen within two weeks of referral by a GP.

What to expect at the clinic

Your visit to the breast clinic may take a number of hours so that all the necessary tests can be carried out (up to 4 hours). You may wish to take a friend or relative with you for company or support, however they will not usually be allowed in areas such as x-ray rooms.

A doctor or specialist nurse experienced in diagnosing and treating breast problems will usually see you first. You may be asked to fill in a short questionnaire including questions about family history of breast problems, any medication including hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or contraception pill that you are taking, or any previous breast surgery.

This will be followed by a breast examination where the doctor or nurse will check both your breasts. The examination involves looking and feeling the breast tissue of both breasts when you are sitting and when you are lying down. As part of the examination it is usual to examine the lymph nodes (glands) under your arm.

Following your examination, you may be advised that you need to have further investigations. Where possible we will try to do these on the same day, or we will make another appointment for you. These will usually include one or more of the following.

Ultrasound

This test is painless and takes a few minutes. A lubricating gel is spread onto the breasts and a hand-held scanning probe, (called a transducer) which emits sound waves, is passed over the area including the axilla. The high-frequency sound waves produce an image of the breast tissue.

Mammogram

This is an x-ray technique for examining the breast. Some women find mammography uncomfortable because pressure is put on the breasts, but this only lasts a few minutes and is not harmful to the breasts.

Fine needle aspiration (FNA)

This is a quick, simple procedure. Using a fine needle and syringe, the doctor takes a sample of cells from the breast. This may result in some bruising. You may be asked to wear a plaster for a few hours over the site where the needle has been used. The sample is sent to the laboratory where it is looked at under a microscope.

Your result may be described to you as one of the following:

- C1 inadequate sample (not enough cells for diagnosis)
- C2 benign (not cancer)
- C3 unusual, abnormal or uncertain but probably benign
- C4 suspicious and possibly malignant (cancer)
- C5 malignant (cancer)

The specialist will use the result to help them decide if further tests and investigations or treatments are needed.

Core biopsy

This test uses a cutting needle to obtain pieces of tissue from the breast lump. Because the needle is thicker than the one used for aspiration, it is done under a local anaesthetic. You will usually have a small dressing or a plaster applied, and asked to keep this on for a day afterward. Once the local anaesthetic wears off you may find that your breast aches and it may also become bruised. You can take pain relief if the area is tender or painful. You will be given more information about this before you leave the clinic. The sample is examined in the Pathology Department to establish the diagnosis and the results will be available in seven to 10 days time.

Before you leave your appointment you will be told how to access your results. You will either be made an appointment to attend a results clinic or given a card with a contact No for the breast care nurses so you can telephone for your results.

Your results may be described to you as one of the following:

- B1 normal breast tissue
- B2 benign (not cancer)
- B3 uncertain but probably benign
- B4 suspicious and possibly malignant (cancer)
- B5 malignant (cancer)

Other tests

Triple assessment (examination, imaging and biopsy) is usually all that is needed to make a diagnosis. However, sometimes you may need other tests.

Punch biopsy

A punch biopsy may be performed when there is a change to the skin of the breast or nipple. It involves taking a very small cylindrical piece of tissue from the area of change. You will be given a local anaesthetic before a tiny cutter device is used to take the sample. Just like a core biopsy you will be asked to wear a small dressing or plaster afterwards.

Vacuum assisted biopsy

If a previous biopsy has not given a clear result and more breast tissue is needed to make a diagnosis, or if the area of concern is difficult to target, you may be offered a vacuumed assisted biopsy. This procedure takes longer and will mean a referral to Exeter Hospital as we do not have the equipment necessary in North Devon.

Getting your results

The clinic will let you know about an appointment to return for your results. If you have had a core biopsy the breast care nurse will normally make you an appointment to attend the Nurse Led result clinic within 10 days. It may be a good idea to have your partner or close friend with you to get your results.

Otherwise you will be asked to phone the breast care nurse for your result or that you will be informed by letter. A summary of your breast assessment and results will also be sent to your GP. It is now a Trust policy that you will receive a copy of the GP letter unless you specifically express you wouldn't want a copy.

For the majority of women breast assessment will show normal breast changes or a benign breast condition. In this case the specialist will explain what it is and whether you need any treatment or follow up.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or e-mail ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of ward staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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