Your guide to needle tests

There are several different types of needle tests that can be done to take a biopsy from your breast. The type of test that will be recommended will depend on your particular breast problem.

Q1. What is a fine needle aspiration test (FNA)?
A1. This test uses a fine needle to remove a sample of cells from inside the breast and/or under your arm (axilla) which will be looked at under the microscope. The test gives the doctor more information about the area being examined.

Q2. How is the test done?
A2. This is usually done with you lying down and the whole procedure will take about 10-15 minutes.

The needle test (FNA) can be done immediately if the doctor can feel the area in your breast that he/she wants to sample. This test can usually be done while you are in clinic, or you will be given an appointment to return to have this done.

If the area cannot be felt, the Radiologist (X-ray doctor) or Radiographer will do the FNA with the help of the X-ray (mammogram) or ultrasound machine to guide him/her to the exact area to be sampled.

If the test is to be done using X-ray guidance, this will be done with you sitting in a chair, and having your breast held in the X-ray machine whilst the needle is positioned. Further X-rays will be taken to ensure that the needle position is in the right place. This is called a stereotactic FNA.

If the FNA is to be done using ultrasound guidance, this will be done with you lying on a couch.

Whichever method is used to find the area to be sampled in the breast, a very thin needle will then be passed into your breast or underarm (axilla) to take a sample of the cells.

Q3. Will the test be painful?
A3. As all women are different, so is the discomfort that they may feel during the test. Most women say this test is uncomfortable and compare it to having a blood sample taken from their arm. A local anaesthetic may be given.

Q4. What about the results of the test?
A4. The results take 5 - 8 working days and an appointment will be made for you to return to the clinic for this.
Q5. What is a core biopsy?
A5. A core needle biopsy may be performed in addition to FNA, or instead of this. This uses a slightly bigger needle and gives the Doctors a sliver of tissue to look at under the microscope. It is often done at the same time as the FNA.

Q6. How is the test done?
A6. As with a FNA this is usually done with you lying down and the whole procedure will take about 10-15 minutes. The test can be done immediately if the Doctor can feel the area in your breast that he/she wants to sample. This test can usually be done while you are in clinic, or you will be given an appointment to return to have this done.

A local anaesthetic will be used to “numb” the area. A small cut will then be made in the skin and a needle inserted to take a small piece of tissue from the breast. The instrument used makes a loud ‘click’ when the samples are taken. Several samples are usually taken.

The needle is then removed and the area pressed for a few minutes to help stop any bleeding. A dressing will then be applied; this should be left in place for 3-4 days. It is common for you to be quite bruised for some days after this procedure.

Q7. Will the test be painful?
A7. As all women are different, so is the discomfort that they may feel during the test. As local anaesthetic is always given the discomfort during the test should be minimal.

Q8. What about the results of the test?
A8. It usually takes about 5-7 working days to examine these samples and an appointment will be made for you to return to the clinic for these results.

Q9. What is a mammotome biopsy?
A9. If the FNA and/or core biopsies are unhelpful or more information is needed about the area in your breast being examined, then you may be advised to have a mammotome biopsy. This may reduce the need for you to have an operation to help to find out what is going on in your breast.

As this test usually takes about 45-60 minutes to do you will normally be given an appointment to return to have this done.

Q10. How is the test done?
A10. This test is also known as an image guided vacuum assisted biopsy as the Radiologist (X-ray doctor) or specially trained Radiographer will do the test with the help of the X-ray (mammogram) or ultrasound machine to guide her/him to the exact area to be sampled.

It can be done with you either lying down or sitting depending on whether the ultrasound or mammogram machine is used.
A local anaesthetic will be used to “numb” the area and a small cut will then be made in the skin. A needle, with a suction device attached, will be then inserted into the breast and small amounts of tissue will be sucked away through the needle. This is repeated until the Doctor feels that she/he has enough tissue.

The needle is then removed and the area pressed for a few minutes to help stop any bleeding. A dressing will then be applied; this should be left in place for three-four days. It is common for you to be quite bruised for some days after this procedure.

Q11. Will the test be painful?
A11. As all women are different, so is the discomfort that they may feel during the test. As local anaesthetic is always given the discomfort during the test should be minimal.

Q12. What about the results of the test?
A12. It usually takes about 5-8 working days to examine these samples and an appointment will be made for you to return to the clinic for these results.

Q13. What happens after these tests?
A13. Before you leave the clinic you will be advised as to what to expect after the particular test that you have had done.

Sometimes it is necessary to leave a marker clip in the breast after a biopsy has been done. This shows the place where the biopsy has been taken from. This clip is very small and is usually made from either titanium or porcelain and you will not be aware of it after the procedure is done. The clip will remain in the breast unless it is decided that surgery is needed to remove this area of breast tissue in which case it may be removed at the time of surgery. The clip is safe to leave in place and will not cause you any problems; it will not activate the alarm on body scanners at the airport, and if ever you require an MRI scan (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) it will not interfere with this test.

After any of these tests you may experience some tenderness or discomfort. This is quite normal and may be relieved by taking a mild painkiller, e.g. paracetamol. Please do not take anything containing aspirin as this may cause you to bruise even more.

There may be some bruising around the area. This is normal and should fade as any other bruise would. You may also be able to feel a small, hard ‘lump’ in the area of the biopsy. This is simply a collection of blood which has formed into a solid bruise and is nothing to worry about. You may be more comfortable wearing a good supportive bra in bed for the first couple of nights as this can also help to reduce bruising.

The small dressing applied after the test can usually be removed after 3-4 days.
You can bathe or shower as usual. You may find warm baths soothing but avoid hot baths and showers as these may make you bruise more.

If you are concerned about the amount of bruising you have you can contact your GP or Nurse Specialist for advice.

Contact Details

Your Nurse Specialist:

Tel: 0191 2820207 / 8
Office Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

Email:

Sandra Scott  Sandra.Scott@nuth.nhs.uk
Kathryn Kay  Kathryn.Kay@nuth.nhs.uk
Eileen Tague  Eileen.Tague@nuth.nhs.uk
Lesley Perlish  Lesley.Perlish@nuth.nhs.uk
Joanne Wilson  Joanne.Wilson21@nuth.nhs.uk
Alison Wright  Alison.Wright@nuth.nhs.uk

Further information is available on the hospital website:
www.newcastle-hospitals.org.uk

Published by Nurse Specialists (Breast Care)
Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
February 2015
For review September 2016.