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REMOVAL OF THE SUBMANDIBULAR SALIVARY GLAND

This leaflet has been designed to improve your understanding of your forthcoming treatment and contains answers to many of the common questions. If you have any other questions not answered here or would like further explanation please ask.

What is the submandibular gland?

The submandibular gland is a salivary gland about the size of a walnut that lies immediately below the lower jaw. Saliva comes from it through a tube that opens into the floor of the mouth under the tongue just behind the lower front teeth. There are many reasons for removing this gland and these include infection, blockage, for example by stones, or development of tumours to name the most common causes.

What does the operation involve?

The submandibular gland is removed under a general anaesthetic, ie you are put to sleep completely. The operation involves a cut within a skin crease around two inches long (5cm) in the upper part of the neck just below the jaw line. Once the gland has been removed the incision is repaired with stitches. These usually need to be removed around a week after surgery. At the end of the operation a small tube may be placed through the skin into the underlying wound to drain any blood which may collect. This is usually removed on the morning following surgery.

Will anything else be done while I am asleep?

If your gland is being removed because of infection that is caused by a stone it may also be necessary to make a cut inside the mouth to remove the stone.

How long will the operation take?

The length of time partly depends upon the degree of difficulty. An uncomplicated procedure will take approximately an hour.

What can I expect after the operation?

You usually require a night in hospital following the surgery. It is unlikely to be very sore but regular painkillers will be arranged for you. There is relatively little swelling following submandibular gland removal.

Do I need any time off work?

It is usually advisable to take a week off from work to recover from the surgery. During this time you should avoid strenuous activity.

Is there anything that I need to do when I get home?

It is important to keep the wound dry for the first week following surgery. This obviously means you need to take care when washing or shaving.

Will I have a scar?

All cuts made through the skin leave a scar but the majority of these fade with time and are difficult to see when they are fully healed. It may take several months for your scar to fade but eventually it should blend into the natural folds and contours of your face.

What are the possible problems?

- Bleeding from the wound is unlikely to be a problem. If it occurs it usually does so within the first 12 hours of surgery which is why you need to stay in hospital overnight.

- Infection is uncommon but if your surgeon thinks it may happen to you a short course of antibiotics will be prescribed.

Are any nerves at risk?

There are three nerves that lie close to the submandibular gland that can be injured during removal of the gland. Most nerve damage occurs as a result of bruising since they are held out of the way and protected during surgery. If nerve damage occurs it is usually temporary.

- Weakness of the lower lip - a lower branch of the facial nerve is at risk in the removal of a submandibular gland. If this happens it affects the movement of your lower lip, leading to a slightly crooked smile.
- Numbness of the tongue. The lingual nerve supplies feeling to the side of the tongue and in injury results in a tingly or numb feeling in the tongue, similar to the sensation after having an injection at the dentist.
- Restricted tongue movement - the hypoglossal nerve is only very rarely bruised. It is a nerve that makes the tongue move and damage can therefore result in a decrease of tongue movement.

Is permanent nerve damage possible?

Most injury to these nerves is temporary although and it can take several months for them to recover. Permanent damage is possible and usually only occurs in only the most difficult cases.

If a salivary gland is removed will I be left with a dry mouth?

The removal of one salivary gland will not have an impact on the amount of saliva that you produce. There are many other salivary glands left in and around the mouth that will still keep it moist.

For further advice and information please see the web pages of The British Association of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeons www.baoms.org.uk