

# Vulva and vaginal biopsies

This leaflet explains more about genital skin biopsies, including the benefits, risks, any alternatives and what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

## What is a biopsy?

A biopsy is a procedure by which a small sample of skin or tissue is removed so that it can be tested for abnormalities.

## Why should I have a biopsy?

This procedure allows us to examine the skin sample under a microscope (histological examination). Looking at the pattern of cells we can establish or confirm a diagnosis. This helps us to plan the best treatment for you.

## What are the risks?

It is rare for any complications to occur after biopsy. Very occasionally an infection may develop despite you doing all the right things. This will slow down the healing process and may make the site sore for a few days, but the infection can be treated with antibiotics and there are usually no long-term side effects.

Sometimes it is not possible to make a diagnosis from the biopsy sample.

## Are there any alternatives?

There are usually no alternatives to establish a definite diagnosis. Without a biopsy your treatment will need to be based on clinical findings alone, which are not always clear. This may mean that it takes longer to find the correct treatment for your condition.

## How can I prepare for a biopsy?

You may be given a local anaesthetic cream to use before your biopsy. If you are, you should apply this to the affected area, as directed by your doctor or nurse, an hour before you are due to be seen for your appointment.

## Giving my consent (permission)

We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

You should receive the leaflet, **Helping you decide: our consent policy**, which gives you more information. If you do not, please ask a member of staff caring for you for a copy.

## What happens during a biopsy?

The doctor or nurse will decide the best position for the biopsy. It is usually the part of the skin most affected by the condition. The area will first be numbed with local anaesthetic, which is

injected using a small needle. It will sting at first but the area will very quickly become numb so you will not feel any pain.

After the skin sample has been taken, the biopsy site may be treated with a chemical stick (silver nitrate or Monsell's solution) to stop bleeding. This will leave a small black spot which will disappear when the skin heals, usually within seven days. Occasionally, a small stitch may be necessary, but this will not cause any further pain because of the local anaesthetic.

The appointment should take about 30 minutes.

## **Will I feel any pain?**

You may feel pulling or pressure on the area of the biopsy but you should not feel any pain during the procedure. If the area feels tender after the procedure, you may wish to take your usual painkillers.

## **What happens after a biopsy?**

You can go home immediately after the biopsy. Please remember that it is normal for the area to be red and tender for the first few days.

It can take up to three weeks for us to receive your biopsy results.

## **What do I need to do after I go home?**

It is important to keep the biopsy site clean and dry. We recommend that you do not wash the area for about 12 hours following the procedure.

After a shower or bath, you should gently pat the skin dry – do not rub the area, as the friction will slow the healing of the biopsy site. Some spotting of blood may occur for about two to three days after the biopsy.

You should avoid sexual intercourse until the area is healed and comfortable. If you have had a stitch, this will gradually dissolve over the next one to two weeks as the wound heals.

## **What should I do if I have a problem?**

If you experience any signs of infection around the biopsy site (such as increased pain, redness, heat or swelling), or feel that the bleeding is excessive, please contact the McNair Clinic (contact details below) or go to your nearest A&E department.

## **Will I have a follow-up appointment?**

Most people will come back for a follow-up appointment to get their results. This will be arranged for you in clinic following your biopsy.

## **Contact us**

If you have any questions or concerns about your biopsy, please contact a member of the nursing staff at the McNair Centre on 020 7188 7483 (Monday to Friday, 8.30 am to 6pm).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## **Useful sources of information**

### **Pharmacy Medicines Helpline**

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

**t:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'    **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's    **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

### **Language Support Services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

**t:** 020 7188 8815    **fax:** 020 7188 5953

### **NHS 111**

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

**NHS Choices** Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### **Become a member of your local hospitals, and help shape our future**

Membership is free and it is completely up to you how much you get involved. To become a member of our Foundation Trust, you need to be 18 years of age or over, live in Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth or Westminster or have been a patient at either hospital in the last five years. To join:

**t:** 0848 143 4017    **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)

**w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk)