

PATIENT GUIDE

Useful Information about Wide Local Excision

Many patients have questions and concerns about what to expect when having surgery for melanoma. This Patient Guide aims to answer questions you may have and provide you with support and information relating to after care that will help after your procedure.

This Patient Guide is for patients having a wide local excision only. If you are having a wide local excision and a sentinel lymph node biopsy, instructions will change as you will have the procedure in the hospital setting. Additionally, if a skin graft is required, this help sheet will not be recommended.

Surgery

Surgery is a procedure to remove cancer from the body. It's sometimes called an operation or surgical resection.

Doctors follow medical standards called clinical practice guidelines, which outline the best available treatments for particular melanomas. For most melanomas, surgery is recommended as the most effective approach, either on its own or in combination with other treatments.

Wide Local Excision (WLE)

Even though the initial biopsy you had may have removed the melanoma, a doctor will usually recommend a second procedure known as a wide local excision. This means removing more normal skin from around the melanoma (margin).

Removing more skin around the melanoma reduces the risk of it coming back (recurring). The recommended margin is usually between 5 mm and 10 mm, depending on the type, thickness and site of the melanoma. For thicker melanomas, a wider margin of up to 20 mm may be advised.

When performed alone, a wide local excision is often conducted as a day procedure. This means you can go home soon after the surgery, provided there are no complications. Depending on the site and size of the surgery, your WLE might be performed with local anaesthetic (usually in your doctor's rooms) or might require the attendance of an anaesthetist to provide sedation or a general anaesthetic (this will be done in a hospital setting). These options should be discussed with your doctor.

People with a melanoma thickness of 0.8mm with ulceration or 1.0 mm (or greater) with or without ulceration will usually be offered a Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy to be performed at the same time as the wide local excision. This will mean that the WLE will be completed in the hospital setting.

After a wide local excision, the tissue removed will be sent to a laboratory for testing. If the edge of the tissue sample does not contain any melanoma cells, it is called a clear margin. If the margins aren't clear, you may need further surgery to remove more tissue.

Prior to a Wide Local Excision

- Surgery is different for everyone. Your doctor will speak with you about what to expect
- If you are working or have caring responsibilities, make sure you organise the day off work and for someone to take over your caring duties whilst having your surgery
- Many surgeon rooms will have a designated website and many provide information about what to expect, so please do go on and have a look
- Plan how you will get to your surgery. If travelling by car, ask about parking. Ask if you are able to drive post surgery. You may need to arrange for someone to drive you.
- Take someone along to your appointments, if possible, as you won't retain all the information given to you. Take a note pad with all your questions and a pen to jot down any answers.
- If you are feeling anxious about having surgery, talk to the treatment team, your GP, a family member or friend, or call the Melanoma Patients Australia Melanoma Support Line on 1300 88 44 50 or the Cancer Council on 13 11 20.

- You may have to wait for a surgery appointment. How long you wait depends on the type of melanoma you have, its stage, the surgery you are having, and your doctor or hospital's schedule. The waiting list is organised by how urgently people need surgery. This ensures that people are treated in turn but without waiting for periods of time that would be harmful. Waiting for a surgery appointment can be a stressful time – if you are anxious or concerned speak to your surgeon or call Melanoma Patients Australia Melanoma Support Line 1300 88 44 50
- Ask your doctor how much time you will need to take away from usual activities after surgery such as work, exercise or caring responsibilities. This will differ depending on the site of your melanoma and the extent of your usual activities (eg occupation, type of exercise, caring responsibilities)
- If English is not your primary language you may request an interpreter for your appointments

On the day

- Allow extra time for travel to avoid rushing
- Explore ways to relax -read a book or listen to music while you wait, ask a friend or family member to keep you company, or try chatting to other people in the waiting area.
- Wear soft, loose, warm clothing.
- If required, take pain relief as prescribed (check if you can eat or drink before the procedure)
- There will most likely be a doctor and a nurse present. You may be asked to change into a hospital gown and remove any jewellery.
- Occasionally there may be delays for your appointment, so bring something to take your mind off waiting, such as a book, phone/tablet or crochet/knitting
- You may also want to bring any medical information you may need e.g. list of medications or questions you want to ask

After a Wide Local Excision

- Most people will be able to have the wound closed with stitches. These may or may not be dissolvable. If they are not dissolvable, you will be given an appointment to remove the stitches (this is usually done by a nurse).
- You will have a scar but this will become less noticeable with time.
- Pain relief- the area around the WLE may feel tight and tender for a few days. Your doctor may prescribe pain relief if necessary.

Questions to ask your Surgeon

It is unlikely that all of these questions will be relevant to you. There are many potential questions listed to help you to think about and prepare the questions that are most important to you.

Information about the surgeon

- Do you specialise in this type of surgery? How were you trained?
- How many times have you done this surgery?
- Which hospitals do you operate in?

Treatment choice

- Why do I need surgery?
- Do I have a choice of treatments?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of surgery for me?
- How successful is this type of surgery for this type of melanoma?
- What is the cost? Are there any extra costs I should know about?
- Can I talk to someone who has had this surgery?
- Can I get a second opinion?
- Will I need other treatment before or after surgery?

The surgery

- What type of surgery will I have?
- What exactly will you do during the operation?
- How long will the surgery take?
- Can I eat before the surgery?
- Could your plans to operate on me change? Why?
- What anaesthetic will I receive? How will it be given?
- What are the potential risks and complications?
- Where will I have the surgery?

Side effects and recovery

- What are the potential side effects of the surgery?
- Will I have tubes or drains?
- Will I have any pain? How will it be managed?
- When I go home, will I be provided with written information about my aftercare?
- What kind of support is available to people who have this type of surgery?

Before leaving the clinic

- Will the stitches need to be taken out or will they dissolve?
- Will the wound dressing need to be changed? Who will do this?
- Can I eat my usual diet?
- What problems should I look out for when I go home?

- Who should I call if I have a problem?
- How often will I need check-ups?
- Can I have a shower or bath?
- When do I need to see my surgeon for a follow-up?
- When can I go back to work? Can I do my usual activities (e.g. exercise, housework, driving, caring responsibilities)?
- What medicines do I need to take or avoid?

Getting Support

If you would like any further information about a wide local excision or require support and information to help you with decision making, or other related concerns, please contact the Melanoma Patients Australia Melanoma Support line on 1300 88 44 50.

Connecting with Melanoma Patients Australia Support Programs

Melanoma Support Line 1300 88 44 50

Connect with other patients through [Melanoma Patients Peer Support Programs](#) via the website

Connect with [Melanoma Patients Australia Melanoma Telehealth Nurse](#)

The information contained in this resource is intended to be a guide. Every patient is different and will have different experiences, the information contained in this resource will not apply to all patients. This information is not aimed specifically to an individual and it is therefore important that patients always consult their specialist doctor or other medical professional (e.g., General Practitioner) about any specific matters affecting their individual treatment and care. The information in this guide is not intended to replace medical information or substitute the formal professional advice or your supportive care team. Melanoma Patients Australia exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damager incurred by using or relying on the information provided in this resource.

Updated October 2025