In 1963, Women’s College Hospital was the first hospital in Canada to use mammography as a routine diagnostic tool. In 1977, the Henrietta Banting Breast Centre was established to provide management of breast disease for women.

The Women’s College Hospital breast program encompasses breast cancer prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment and care, and research in breast disease and public and professional education. We are committed to a philosophy of integrated, interdisciplinary, timely and comprehensive programs and services.
What is a lymph node?
Lymph nodes or glands are a part of the body’s infection fighting system. They are found throughout the body mainly in the neck, armpits and groin. A clear fluid called lymph flows through the nodes.

What is an axillary node dissection?
It is surgery that removes some of the lymph nodes from the armpit area to find out if there are any cancer cells in them. This information is necessary to determine if the cancer has spread outside of the breast. It can also be called a “lymph node dissection.”

What happens during the surgery?
After you have been put to sleep, a cut (incision) is made in the armpit area and the fat pad area containing the lymph nodes that drain the breast area is removed. The number of lymph nodes removed and if there is any cancer in them is not known until the final results are available. It can take two to three (2-3) weeks for this information to be available. The cut area (incision) is closed with stitches that dissolve and paper-like tapes. A tube is put in place to drain the fluid from the wound site and a clear plastic dressing or gauge bandage is applied over the area.

What happens after the surgery?
You will be taken to the recovery room after your operation is finished. When you are awake, you will be taken to your room where you will remain overnight. The nurses will check you and make sure your drain is working well. The nurse will also instruct you on how to take care and empty your drain when you are at home (this information will also be given to you in the pre-admission appointment).

You will go home with the drain in place. A referral will be made for a home care nurse. A request will be made for the nurse to visit while the drain is in place. Timing and frequency of the visits depends upon the availability of the home care nurses. A nurse will visit you for as long as the drain is in place. The nurse will change the dressing and monitor the amount of drainage from your wound. She/he will also review the information given to you about the care of the drain. This will help you to feel more comfortable handling the drain when the nurse is not there.

The nurse will remove the drain when 24-hour drainage collection is less than 30 cc’s for two (2) days in a row. After the drain(s) are removed you may find that the lymph fluid collects around the wound area or under your arm. You may “hear” the fluid or the area may become quite hard and swollen. This is not an emergency, but it may make you feel uncomfortable. If this happens, call your doctor or nurse. Some of the fluid can be drained which can make you more comfortable.

You may:
- Have a sore throat from the breathing tube that was in place during your operation.
- Feel sick to your stomach and tired from the drugs you were given to make you sleep.
- Have numbness, tingling or pain in your shoulder or the back of your arm. If you have pain, take the medication prescribed for you as needed. If you did not get a prescription for pain medication, you can take Tylenol Extra Strength or Advil. Contact your doctor if your pain does not go away. It is important for you to rest and regain your strength.

You will:
- Have numbness along the inside of your arm on the same side as your operation. This may or may not go away. You may also have tingling and aching in the area for several months.
- Have some bruising and tenderness in the area of your operation.
- Find it more comfortable to place your arm on a pillow at night. This will support your arm and you may have less pain.

What activities can I do after my operation?
- Avoid any activity that involves heavy lifting, pulling or pushing for four to six (4-6) weeks (over 10 pounds is considered heavy).
- Continue with the exercises you were given in the pre-admission clinic until full use of your arm has returned. Be sure to follow the correct exercises while the drain is in place and add the others when the drain is removed. The exercises are a very important part of your recovery. They will prevent the muscles in your arm and shoulder from becoming “frozen” or stiff. The exercises may cause some discomfort. Taking pain medication 30 minutes before doing your exercises will help.
- Discuss returning to work and driving with your surgeon.
- The amount of recovery time needed varies from one person to the next.

What care does my incision need?
The incision area and drain should be kept dry. Your home care nurse will change the dressing around the drain when they visit. You should remove the skin strips 10 days after your operation if they have not already peeled off. Do not apply any lotions or creams to the incision.

When can I bathe?
You can have a shower 48 hours after your operation if your surgeon instructs you to do so. You may tub bath from the waist down, but do not soak the incision. Avoid rubbing the incision area. Pat the area dry with a clean towel. Do not share the towel with anyone else.

Notify your doctor if you experience any of the following:
- Unusual drainage of fluid or bleeding from the incision
- Redness, swelling, or tenderness around the incision
- Sudden severe pain
- Temperature is 38 C(100.4 F) or higher for 24 hours
- Sometimes, after an operation like this, fluid may collect around the wound. If the area becomes hard and swollen, call your doctor or nurse and make an appointment. This is not an emergency. Some of the fluid can be drained off which may make you more comfortable.

If you are unable to reach your doctor or the doctor covering, then it is important for you to go to the emergency department closest to your home.

Precaution
Occasionally after surgery, swelling of your arm known as “lymphedema” can occur. This is caused by the loss of lymph nodes under your arm. Due to the loss of some of the lymph nodes, the lymph fluid travels more slowly. This makes it easier for infection to develop in your arm. See your family doctor if your hand or your arm becomes red and painful.

There is a lymphedema clinic at the Cancer Centre that your surgeon will refer you to if the need arises. A nurse who specializes in the care and prevention of lymphedema will see you.