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Nail surgery guide

Nail surgery is a low risk procedure during which part, or all, of a toenail is removed under local anaesthetic.

The procedure can relieve a painful condition, remove a cause of infection and prevent future complications.

We carry out a full assessment to see whether you are suitable for this procedure. This is because certain medical conditions or medications can affect the action of the local anaesthetic and also your ability to heal. If there is a possibility that you could be pregnant, nail surgery should be deferred until after the first twelve weeks.

You will be asked to sign a consent form on the day of surgery.

What does it involve?

Two injections, one each side of the toe, are used to make the toe feel numb. This may be uncomfortable but once the anaesthetic is working, you will not feel pain, although you may feel a slight sense of pressure. Following the surgery there may be mild swelling or bruising of the area. This will soon disappear.

Part, or all, of the toenail is carefully lifted from the nail bed, requiring no cutting of the skin and no stitches.

A chemical called Phenol (or carbolic acid) is used to destroy the cells in the nail matrix to prevent re-growth of the portion of the nail that has been removed. This can, in rare cases, cause slight burning or blistering which will be limited to this area.

Finally a sterile dressing is applied to the operation site in order to prevent dirt entering the wound. The whole procedure takes approximately 45 minutes.

Before nail surgery

You may eat and drink as normal as this will not interfere with the local anaesthetic.

Nail surgery will not be carried out if you have received a local anaesthetic for any other treatment in the 24 hours before your nail surgery appointment.

You should continue to take any medication prescribed by your GP.

If you have been prescribed inhalers or a nitrate by your GP you should bring them with you to the nail surgery.

Please remove all traces of nail varnish on the affected toe(s).

You will need to bring an open toed sandal or slipper with you to accommodate the bulky dressing that is put on your toe as you will not be able to wear ordinary shoes.

You will need someone to bring you to the appointment

The local anaesthetic takes two to three hours to wear off and you are, therefore, advised not to drive yourself home but to make alternative arrangements. Your car insurance will be affected for 12 hours after surgery.

You will need to obtain a supply of dry sterile dressings

You will need these to carry out the redressings. We recommend Melolin or similar and surgical tape such as Mefix or Micropore. These are available from most pharmacies or supermarkets.

After nail surgery

After surgery you will be given an information sheet on post-operative care plus information on how to redress the toe(s). The original dressing will need to be on for 48 hours and to be kept dry during that time. You will be offered another dressing appointment at this time if you feel you would like one.

Note: If you are unable to do your own re-dressings and have no one to help you, you will need to make arrangements with your practice nurse before you have surgery. The toe(s) will need to be re-dressed every two or three days until healing is satisfactory and the dressing is completely dry when the dressing is removed.

Any discomfort or pain can be relieved with simple pain killers such as paracetamol. Aspirin is not advised as it encourages bleeding.

Occasionally whilst healing the toe may become infected and a course of antibiotics may be needed.

How long does it take to heal?

It will take between 4 to 12 weeks, depending on the type of procedure performed. On average it takes 6 to 8 weeks before the wound is completely healed. You can usually return to work, or school, the day after the procedure. However this is dependent on your occupation and whether you will be able to wear footwear which will accommodate the bulky dressing and which does not squeeze the toe(s). Your podiatrist will discuss this with you. Swimming and sport cannot be resumed until the toe is dry on removal of the dressing.

Will the nail grow back?

The aim of the surgery is to prevent the nail from growing back, but no procedure has a 100 percent success rate. Audit suggests a success rate of about 90 percent with this particular form of treatment.

What are the risks and complications?

Common risk of nail surgery includes pain, bleeding and infection. This may result in further surgery or referral to another service. Rarely there may be scaring or damage to the adjacent tissues e.g. nerves, tendons and blood vessels. In some cases, there may be delayed healing. In very rare cases you may suffer an adverse reaction or allergy to the medicines used. The risks and benefits of nail surgery will be discussed at your assessment.