

Temporal artery biopsy for the diagnosis of giant cell arteritis

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please telephone the PALS desk on 01271 314090.

What is giant cell arteritis?

Giant cell arteritis (GCA) is an inflammatory condition (vasculitis) of the large and medium-sized blood vessels.

Treatment is in the form of high-dose steroids (prednisolone) and this should be started straight away to try to avoid complications, including problems with vision.

Long-term treatment with steroids can have side-effects so it is important we use a diagnostic test to confirm the diagnosis.

What is temporal artery biopsy?

Temporal artery biopsy is the 'gold standard' diagnostic test. It is the best way to diagnose giant cell arteritis and is very helpful with patients who do not respond to long-term treatment as expected.

What does the test involve?

You will be asked to sign a consent form which outlines the procedure and any risks involved.

The procedure takes around 45 minutes. You will need to lie down and keep your head still. A small amount of hair may need to be removed from the side of the forehead.

A local anaesthetic is used to numb the area and a small section of artery is removed from the side of the forehead. The wound is several centimetres long and is stitched up using absorbable sutures (stitches). These do not need to be removed and will dissolve over the next few days to weeks.

The section of tissue is sent for examination under a microscope by a pathologist.

Where is it done?

You will be contacted directly by the booking admissions officer with a date for your temporal artery biopsy. The procedure will take place in the day case unit at North Devon District Hospital. As it is a day case surgery, you will need to arrange for someone to pick you up after the procedure.

You need to be prepared to spend the whole morning or afternoon at the hospital in total (depending on your appointment time). The procedure itself takes about 45 minutes.

What preparations are needed?

You can eat and drink as normal before the procedure. You do not need to stop taking any of your medications before the procedure.

However if you take blood-thinning medications, you should discuss with your GP whether you should continue these prior to your procedure date.

What happens after the test?

A small dressing or waterproof glue will be used to cover the wound. There may be a small amount of pain. Use simple pain killers such as paracetamol if required.

Continue taking steroids and other medications as prescribed.

Be careful when washing your hair and face to avoid disturbing the wound.

If there is a material dressing on your wound, this can be removed after 24 to 48 hours. If you have a waterproof glue dressing, this will gradually dissolve and no action needs to be taken.

Are there any risks?

The risks associated with temporal artery biopsy are small, but possible complications include:

Post-operative infection- Look out for redness and increasing pain. If this occurs, seek medical attention from your GP.

Bleeding/bruising during the operation and for a short time afterwards- This is normal. If it persists over several days to a week or you are concerned, please contact your GP.

Scar- Often in hairline so may not be visible

On rare occasions nerves can be damaged, leading to numbness of the skin or a droopy eyebrow.

If you are concerned about any symptoms after the procedure, please contact your GP in the first instance.

Follow-up

We will discuss the results of the biopsy at your next rheumatology appointment. Occasionally, even in patients with GCA, the biopsy can be negative. If this happens we will discuss further treatment at your next appointment.

Further information

If you need further information about the procedure, please contact the vascular team secretaries. The telephone number is 01271 322424.

More information regarding giant cell arteritis can be found on these websites:

Vasculitis UK – www.vasculitis.org.uk/about-vasculitis/giant-cell-arteritis-temporal-arteritis

Arthritis Research UK – www.arthritisresearchuk.org/arthritis-information/conditions/giant-cell-arteritis.aspx

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple
Devon EX31 4JB
Tel. 01271 322577
www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk

© Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
This leaflet was designed by the Communications Department.
Tel: 01271 313970 / email: ndht.contactus@nhs.net