

Having a skin biopsy in the Genetics Clinic

This leaflet has been designed to describe what a skin biopsy is, how it is done and why it is a useful test. If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything in more detail, please feel free to ask your genetics doctor or counsellor.

What is a skin biopsy?

A skin biopsy is the removal of a small piece of skin, usually from a person's arm, thigh or buttock.

Why may a skin biopsy be useful?

Skin biopsies can help us make, or rule out, a diagnosis or they can guide treatment.

Consent and skin biopsy

Before you or your child have a skin biopsy taken, it is important that you understand what the procedure involves, what will happen to your skin sample, how you will be given the result of the test and what the implications of the test result might be.

We need your written permission to perform a skin biopsy and your agreement is called consent.

How is a skin biopsy taken?

Skin biopsies are usually done using local anaesthetic. Once the anaesthetic has taken effect, it is not a painful procedure. It takes about ten minutes to perform and the procedure will be done by a doctor.

- The skin is cleaned with antiseptic.
- A small amount of anaesthetic is applied to or injected into the skin to numb it.
- When the skin is numb a small circle of skin 3-4mm (less than a quarter the size of your little fingernail) is cut using a surgical tool similar to a hole punch.
- The sample of skin is separated from the rest of the skin with a small scalpel and sent for analysis.
- Pressure is then applied to the site of the biopsy until bleeding stops. Steristrip plasters are used when possible, but a single stitch may be required.
- A dressing is then applied.
- The area should be kept dry for 24 hours.
- The dressing can be taken off after 2 or 3 days.
- If a single stitch has been put in, this can be removed very simply by the practice nurse at your GP's surgery after 5-7 days.

What are the complications?

The skin may begin to bleed again and require a fresh dressing.

There will be a small scar where the biopsy was taken. This is usually red at first and, with time, fades to a white colour.

What happens to the sample of skin?

The skin sample is put into some fluid that contains ingredients necessary to keep the skin cells alive. The DNA can be taken out of skin cells for testing. Some tests need to be done on growing cells. The skin cells can be grown in a small plastic flask in our laboratory. Occasionally, the skin cells fail to grow and a repeat sample is needed. The laboratory can look at:

- Chromosomes or genes in the skin cells.
- Chemical reactions in the skin cells.
- The structure of the skin.

Some of the skin cells may be frozen and stored if further tests are needed. The stored skin cells would not be given to anyone else for testing without your permission, but may be used anonymously as part of the national scheme for quality assurance in NHS genetics laboratories.

When will I get my results?

As it takes time to grow the skin cells in our laboratory and perform specialised tests, it may be several months before the results are available. Sometimes skin cells need to be sent to other laboratories for the testing and in this case it may be longer before results are available.

How will I be given the results?

This will be agreed with you at the time of the test. The result will be treated in strict confidence and will not be given to anyone else unless you have given permission.

For more information

If you need more advice about any aspect of having a skin biopsy in the Genetics Clinic, you are welcome to contact:

Manchester Centre for Genomic Medicine

Sixth Floor
Saint Mary's Hospital
Oxford Road
Manchester
M13 9WL

Telephone: (0161) 276 6506 (Reception)
Facsimile: (0161) 276 6145

The department is staffed Monday–Friday, 9.00 am to 5.00 pm.

Website: www.mangen.co.uk