

Management of Post-Operative Fluid Collections

What is a seroma?

A seroma is a collection of fluid that can build up in a surgical site. The fluid is typically a clear liquid called serum that contains white blood cells and healing factors. It may also contain some old blood from the surgery. It is an expected part of the normal healing process.

When will the seroma be noticeable?

The fluid build-up will most likely become noticeable 5-10 days after surgery, and it will typically peak in volume between 7-14 days. In most cases, your body will slowly reabsorb the fluid over the next few weeks. Sometimes patients will get more discomfort or pain in the 7-10 days after surgery, as the fluid builds up. For patients undergoing breast cancer surgery, surgery in the underarm causes more discomfort than surgery on the breast.

Pain management of a seroma:

Surgical pain is also an expected part of the healing process, and patients may need to take some form of pain medication for a day or two after surgery. Treatments used for pain include over the counter pain medicines such as Acetaminophen (Tylenol), NSAIDs (Motrin, Advil, or Aleve), or prescription medication prescribed by your surgeon. Ice can also be a great pain reliever at any time and will prevent some swelling for approximately 72 hours after surgery.

Some patients find using ice, or heat alternating with ice, can relieve the discomfort of a seroma. These measures are not likely to change the amount of fluid that builds up at this time, but can be soothing. Ice can be used for 20 minutes on, then 20 minutes off, to avoid cold damage to the skin. When using heat, be certain to use only warm temperatures to avoid a burn to the skin.

A small majority of patients may not get adequate relief from the above measures. In this case, it may become necessary to aspirate (drain) the fluid to relieve the pressure. This is a painless, five-minute procedure that is done in the office. Rarely, patients may need more than one aspiration (draining procedure).

What is a hematoma?

A hematoma is a buildup of blood in the surgical site.

Pain Management:

In most cases, a hematoma is a minor complication, associated with mild swelling, mild to moderate discomfort, and moderate to severe bruising. In these cases, the body will usually heal without intervention, slowly absorbing the hematoma over time. Most patients find that using heat can be soothing and help the hematoma to be absorbed. Over-the-counter pain medications may also be helpful.

Warning Signs:

While some swelling is normal and expected after surgery, rapid and dramatic swelling and severe bruising immediately after surgery is an uncommon complication, which may require immediate drainage, or in rare instances, a return to surgery.

Occasionally, a minor hematoma may be aspirated to relieve a patient's discomfort and resume the healing process. If you suspect a hematoma, contact your physician immediately and get instructions on what you should do next.