

A Patient's Guide to Anaesthesia

What is anaesthesia?

Anaesthetics are types of medicine that stop you from feeling pain during your operation or treatment. The types of anaesthesia are:

- **Local anaesthesia**

These are injections that numb a small part of your body. You will stay conscious but free from pain.

- **Regional anaesthesia**

These are injections that numb a larger or deeper part of the body. You will stay conscious but free from pain.

- **General anaesthesia**

This gives a state of controlled unconsciousness. It is essential for some operations. You will be unconscious and feel nothing.

These different types of anaesthesia can be used on their own or in combination with each other.

What is sedation?

Sedatives are medicines that make you feel physically and mentally relaxed. You will remember little or nothing about what happens during your operation or treatment.

Who are anaesthetists?

Anaesthetists are doctors who have specialist training. They look after you before, during and after your operation to make you as comfortable and safe as possible.

A Patient's Guide to Anaesthesia

What you can do before your operation

You will recover faster if you are in the best possible health before your operation or treatment. To reduce any risks from the anaesthetic and to make your operation safer you should:

- **Stop smoking**

Smokers have a higher risk of breathing problems during and after anaesthetics. Give up smoking 6 weeks before your operation to help reduce this risk. Talk to your GP about nicotine replacement therapy or counselling to help you stop smoking. Do not smoke on the day of your procedure.

- **Lose some weight**

If you are very overweight, reducing your weight and improving your fitness will reduce many of the risks of having an anaesthetic. The side effects and complications of an anaesthetic will be discussed later in this fact sheet.

- **See your family doctor (GP)**

Have a health check with your GP and get advice about any other health problems.

- **See your dentist**

If you have loose/broken teeth talk to your dentist before your operation or treatment.

The preadmission clinic

For planned operations, you may be asked to attend a preadmission clinic. You will have a health assessment to ensure you are in the best possible health before your operation or treatment. Your assessment may include blood tests and a recording of the electrical activity of the heart using electrodes placed on the skin.

It is very important to bring a list of all the medicines you take. There are some medicines that should be stopped before you have an operation. You will be told what medicines to stop taking and what medicines to continue.

On the day of your operation or treatment

Eating and drinking

You must follow the hospital's instructions on eating and drinking. It is important to avoid eating and drinking before an operation. If there is food or liquid in your stomach during your anaesthetic, it could come up into your throat and damage your lungs.

Do not eat any **food** for 6 hours before your arrival time at the hospital.

You may continue to drink **only the following fluids** up to 2 hours before your arrival at the hospital:

- Water
- Cordial
- Tea or coffee (**no milk**)
- Lemonade
- Clear apple juice only
- Rehydration drinks (Gatorade/Powerade)

A Patient's Guide to Anaesthesia

If you have diabetes

You may continue to drink **only the following fluids** up until 2 hours before your arrival at the hospital:

- Water
- Diet Cordial
- Carbohydrate free rehydration drinks
- Diet Lemonade
- Tea or coffee (**no milk**)

If you are taking medicines

If you have been told by the doctors in the preadmission clinic to take your usual medicines, please take them with a sip of water on the morning of your operation. Please do not take any medicines you have been told to stop taking.

Please bring to the hospital all of your current medicines that you are taking in the original packet. This is to ensure the doctors write your prescription correctly.

Medicines to stop on day of surgery:

Medicines to take on day of surgery:

When you arrive at hospital

After you are admitted, you will change into a hospital gown and be given a bed to rest in. A family member or friend can wait with you until you go into the operating theatre.

You will be asked several times by staff about your operation and your general health. These questions are safety checks. The questions ensure all the staff who are looking after you know your health background and that you understand what is going to happen.

After your operation

You will be made as comfortable as possible. You will wake up after your operation and feel quite sleepy. You will be taken to the recovery ward. Your pulse and blood pressure will be monitored until you are fully awake. Oxygen will be given to you through a plastic mask over your nose and mouth. When you have recovered safely from your anaesthetic you will be taken to a ward.

A Patient's Guide to Anaesthesia

Pain relief

Pain relief will be given to keep you comfortable. The type of pain relief will depend on the type of procedure you have had and may include:

- **Tablets, capsules or liquids**

These type of medicines are swallowed and are used if you are allowed to drink.

- **Suppositories**

These are medicines that are placed in your rectum. They are used if you cannot swallow or are likely to vomit.

- **Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA)**

This is a method of delivering pain-relieving medicine into the vein by a special machine. You will have a button at your bedside to press if you feel any pain. This allows the machine to deliver a dose of pain medicine. To ensure this is safe your visitors must not press the button for you.

- **Regional blocks and epidurals**

An epidural or regional block is sometimes used during and after major operations. Your anaesthetist will explain them in more detail if these are to be used.

Safety advice following anaesthesia

After your anaesthetic your reasoning, reflexes, judgment and coordination skills may be affected - even if you feel fine.

It is important to follow the advice below:

- If you have had a day surgery operation or treatment please rest at home for a minimum of 24 hours
- For 24 hours after surgery do not:
 - drive any vehicle, including a bicycle;
 - operate machinery;
 - cook using sharp utensils or pour hot liquids;
 - drink alcohol;
 - smoke;
 - take sleeping tablets; or,
 - make any important decisions or sign any contracts
- If you are having a procedure where you will be discharged on the same day:
 - You will not be able to drive so please make arrangements for a responsible adult to drive you home.
 - If you live alone you will need to arrange to either stay with someone or have someone stay with you the night of your surgery

A Patient's Guide to Anaesthesia

Side effects and complications

All medicines, including anaesthetics, may have unwanted effects.

Unwanted side effects from anaesthetics include:

- Feeling sick
- Itchiness
- Dizziness
- Bruising at injection sites
- Sore throat
- Muscle pains
- Headache

These side effects should not last long. Talk to a staff member if you are worried about these side effects.

More common complications include chest infections. These are more likely if you smoke.

More serious complications can occur rarely. These may include damage to your teeth from the breathing tube, a severe allergic reaction, a heart attack, a stroke or breathing difficulties.

Please talk to your anaesthetist if you have any questions.

Questions you may like to ask your anaesthetist

- Who will give my anaesthetic?
- Do I have to have a general anaesthetic?
- What type of anaesthetic do you recommend?
- Have you often used this type of anaesthetic?
- Will I be unconscious and completely unaware during this kind of anaesthetic?
- What are the risks of this type of anaesthetic?
- Do I have any special risks?
- How will I feel afterwards?

Interpreter Services

Professional interpreters are available if you need help understanding or speaking in English. You may have a family member or friend present, but all communication about your treatment, including your consent to have surgery, should be through a professional interpreter. Interpreter services are free and confidential.

It is your right to ask for an interpreter if one is not offered to you. The staff will book the interpreter for you.

If you need to use an interpreter to contact us, please call the telephone Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS National) on 131 450.