



Having Surgery?

What you need to know

Questions to ask your doctor and your surgeon



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This booklet was developed by the **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality** (AHRQ), part of the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services. AHRQ works to improve health care quality, prevent medical errors, and assess what happens to people as a result of the care they receive.

Having Surgery? What You Need to Know is for patients who are facing surgery that is not an emergency. Some of the questions in this booklet may help you and your family understand more about your surgery, whether it has to be done right away or can be done later. Your doctor or nurse also can help you understand what is being done and why. Don't be afraid to ask questions!

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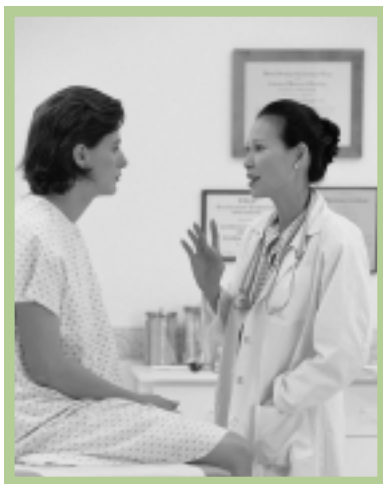
Are you facing surgery? You are not alone. Every year, more than 15 million Americans have surgery.

Most operations are not emergencies and are considered elective surgery. This means that you have time to learn about your operation to be sure it is the best treatment for you. You also have time to work with your surgeon to make the surgery as safe as possible. Be active in your health care to have quality care.

Your regular doctor is your primary care doctor. He or she may be the doctor who suggests that you have surgery and may refer you to a surgeon. You may also want to find another surgeon to get a second opinion, to confirm if surgery is the right treatment for you. You might want to ask friends or coworkers for the names of surgeons they have used.

This booklet gives you some questions to ask your primary care doctor and surgeon before you have surgery. It also gives the reasons for asking these questions. The answers will help you make the best decisions. Look on page 10 in this booklet to get tips about where you can get more information on surgery.

Your doctors should welcome questions. If you do not understand the answers, ask the doctor to explain them clearly. Bring a friend or relative along to help you talk with the doctor. Research shows that patients who are well informed about their treatment are more satisfied with their results.



Get the Basic Facts

Why do I need an operation?

There are many reasons to have surgery. Some operations can relieve or prevent pain. Others can reduce a symptom of a problem or improve some body function. Some surgeries are done to find a problem. Surgery can also save your life. Your doctor will tell you

the purpose of the procedure. Make sure you understand how the proposed operation will help fix your medical problem. For example, if something is going to be repaired or removed, find out why it needs to be done.

What operation are you recommending?

Ask your surgeon to explain the surgery and how it is done. Your surgeon can draw a picture or a diagram and explain the steps in the surgery.

Is there more than one way of doing the operation? One way may require more extensive surgery than another. Some operations that once needed large incisions (cuts in the body) can now be done using much smaller incisions (laparoscopic surgery—see box on page 3). Some surgeries require that you stay in the hospital for 1 or more days. Others let you come in and go home on the same day. Ask why your surgeon wants to do the operation one way over another.

Laparoscopic surgery

Some surgeries that used to need a large incision can now be done using a few small cuts. Instead of a large scar, you will have only a few small scars. Usually, you will recover from this type of surgery more quickly. These incisions let doctors insert a thin tube with a camera (a laparoscope) into the body to help them see. Then they use small tools to do the surgery. This type of surgery is called laparoscopic surgery. Removing the gallbladder, for example, is now mostly done with this type of surgery.

Are there alternatives to surgery?

Sometimes, surgery is not the only answer to a medical problem. Medicines or treatments other than surgery, such as a change in diet or special exercises, might help you just as well—or more. Ask your surgeon or primary care doctor about the benefits and risks of these other choices. You need to know as much as possible about these benefits and risks to make the best decision.

One alternative to surgery may be watchful waiting. During a watchful wait, your doctor and you check to see if your problem gets better or worse over time. If it gets worse, you may need surgery right away. If it gets better, you may be able to wait to have surgery or not have it at all.

How much will the operation cost?

Even if you have health insurance, there may be some costs for you to pay. This may depend on your choice of surgeon or hospital. Ask what your surgeon's fee is and what it covers. Surgical fees often also include some visits after the operation. You also will get a bill from

the hospital for your care and from the other doctors who gave you care during your surgery.

Before you have the operation, call your insurance company. They can tell you how much of the costs your insurance will pay and what share you will have to pay. If you are covered by Medicare, call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) to find out your share of surgery costs.

Learn About the Benefits and Risks

What are the benefits of having the operation?

Ask your surgeon what you will gain by having the operation. For example, a hip replacement may mean that you can walk again with ease.

Ask how long the benefits will last. For some procedures, it is not unusual for the benefits to last for a short time only. You may need a second operation at a later date. For other procedures, the benefits may last a lifetime.

When finding out about the benefits of the operation, be realistic. Sometimes patients expect too much and are disappointed with the outcome or results. Ask your doctor if there is anything you can read to help you understand the procedure and its likely results.

What are the risks of having the operation?

All operations have some risk. This is why you need to weigh the benefits of the operation against the risks of complications or side effects.

Complications are unplanned events linked to the operation. Typical complications are infection, too much bleeding, reaction to anesthesia, or accidental injury. Some people have a greater risk of

complications because of other medical conditions. There also may be side effects after the operation. Often, your surgeon can tell you what side effects to expect. For example, there may be swelling and some soreness around the incision.

There is almost always some pain with surgery. Ask your surgeon how much pain there will be and what the doctors and nurses will do to help stop the pain. Controlling the pain will help you to be more comfortable while you heal. Controlling the pain will also help you get well faster and improve the results of your operation.



What if I don't have this operation?

Based on what you learn about the benefits and risks of the operation, you might decide not to have it. Ask your surgeon what you will gain—or lose—by not having the operation now. Could you be in more pain? Could your condition get worse? Could the problem go away?

Learn How to Get More Information

Where can I get a second opinion?

Getting a second opinion from another doctor is a very good way to make sure that having the operation is the best choice for you. You can ask your primary care doctor for the name of another surgeon who could review your medical file. If you consult another doctor, make sure to get your records from the first doctor so that your tests do not have to be repeated.

Many health insurance plans ask patients to get a second opinion before they have certain operations that are not for an emergency. If your plan does not require a second opinion, you may still ask to have one. Check with your insurance company to see if they will pay for a second opinion. You should discuss your insurance questions with your health insurance company or your employee benefits office. If you are eligible for Medicare, they will pay for a second opinion. (For more information on second opinions, go to page 10.)

Find Out More About Your Operation

What kind of anesthesia will I need?

Anesthesia is used so that surgery can be performed without unnecessary pain. Your surgeon can tell you whether the operation calls for local, regional, or general anesthesia and why this form of anesthesia is best for your procedure.

Local anesthesia numbs only a part of your body and only for a short period of time. For example, when you go to the dentist, you may get a local anesthetic called Novocain. It numbs the gum area around a tooth. Not all procedures done with local anesthesia are painless.

Regional anesthesia numbs a larger portion of your body—for example, the lower part of your body—for a few hours. In most cases, you will be awake during the operation with regional anesthesia. General anesthesia numbs your entire body. You will be asleep during the whole operation if you have general anesthesia.



Anesthesia is quite safe for most patients. It is usually given by a specialized doctor (anesthesiologist) or nurse (nurse anesthetist). Both are highly skilled and have been trained to give anesthesia.

If you decide to have an operation, ask to meet with the person who will give you anesthesia. It is okay to ask what his or her qualifications are. Ask what the side effects and risks of having anesthesia are in your case. Be sure to tell him or her what medical problems you have—including allergies and what medicines you have been taking. These medicines may affect your response to the anesthesia. Be sure to include both prescription and over-the-counter medicines, like vitamins and supplements.

How long will it take me to recover?

Your surgeon can tell you how you might feel and what you will be able to do—or not do—the first few days, weeks, or months after surgery. Ask how long you will be in the hospital. Find out what kind of supplies, equipment, and help you will need when you go home. Knowing what to expect can help you get better faster.

Ask how long it will be before you can go back to work or start regular exercise again. You do not want to do anything that will slow your recovery. For example, lifting a 10-pound bag of potatoes may not seem to be “too much” a week after your operation, but it could be. You should follow your surgeon’s advice to make sure you recover fully as soon as possible.

Making Sure Your Surgery is Safe

Check with your insurance company to find out if you may choose a surgeon or hospital or if you must use ones selected by the insurer. Ask your doctor about which hospital has the best care and results for your condition if you have more than one hospital to choose from. Studies show that for some types of surgery, numbers count—using a surgeon or hospital that does more of a particular type of surgery can improve your chance of a good result.

If you do have a choice of surgeon or hospital, ask the surgeon the following questions:

What are your qualifications?

You will want to know that your surgeon is experienced and qualified to perform the operation. Many surgeons have taken special training and passed exams given by a national board of surgeons. Ask if your surgeon is “board certified” in surgery. Some surgeons also have the letters F.A.C.S. after their name. This means they are Fellows of the American College of Surgeons and have passed another review by surgeons of their surgical skills.

How much experience do you have doing this operation?

One way to reduce the risks of surgery is to choose a surgeon who has been well trained to do the surgery and has plenty of experience doing it. You can ask your surgeon about his or her recent record of successes and complications with this surgery. If it is easier for you, you can discuss the surgeon’s qualifications with your primary care doctor. (For more information about finding out surgeons’ qualifications, go to page 10)

At which hospital will the operation be done?

Most surgeons work at one or two local hospitals. Find out where your surgery will be done and how often the same operation is done there. Research shows that patients often do better when they have surgery in hospitals with more experience in the operation. Ask your doctor about the success rate at the hospitals you can choose between. The success rate is the number of patients who improve divided by all patients having that operation at a hospital. If your surgeon suggests using a hospital with a lower success rate for your surgery, find out why.

Ask the surgeon how long you will be in the hospital.

Until recently, most patients who had surgery stayed in the hospital overnight for 1 or more days. Today, many patients have surgery done as an outpatient in a doctor's office, a special surgical center, or a day surgery unit of a hospital. These patients have an operation and go home the same day. Outpatient surgery is less expensive because you do not have to pay for staying in a hospital room.

Ask whether your operation will be done in the hospital or in an outpatient setting, and ask which of these is the usual way the surgery is done. If your doctor recommends that you stay overnight in the hospital (have inpatient surgery) for an operation that is usually done as outpatient surgery—or recommends outpatient surgery that is usually done as inpatient surgery—ask why. You want to be in the right place for your operation.

Have the surgeon mark the site he or she will operate on.

Rarely, surgeons will make a mistake and operate on the wrong part of the body. A number of groups of surgeons now urge their members to use a marking pen to show the place that they will operate on. The surgeons do this by writing directly on the patient's skin on the day of surgery. Don't be afraid to ask your surgeon to do this to make your surgery safer.

For More Information

Here are some places you can get more information.

Surgery. The American College of Surgeons (ACS) has free pamphlets on When You Need an Operation. For copies, write to the ACS, Office of Public Information, 633 N. St. Clair Street, Chicago, IL 60611, or call 312-202-5000 (toll free: 1-800-621-4111). This group has pamphlets that give general information about surgery and other pamphlets that describe specific surgical procedures. These pamphlets are also available on the ACS Web site at http://www.facs.org/public_info/ppserv.html .

Second Opinion. For the free brochure Getting a Second Opinion Before Surgery: Your Choices and Medicare Coverage, write to Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Room 555, East High Rise Building, 6325 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21207. Ask for Publication No. CMS 02173. The brochure can also be found on the CMS Web site at <http://www.medicare.gov/Publications/home.asp> .

For the name of a specialist in your area who can give you a second opinion, ask your primary care doctor or surgeon, the local medical society, or your health insurance company. Medicare beneficiaries may also obtain information from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Medicare hotline; call toll-free 1-800-633-4227.

Anesthesia. Free booklets on what you should know about anesthesia are available from the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) or the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA). For copies, write to ASA at 520 North Northwest Highway, Park Ridge, IL 60068, or call 847-825-5586; or write to AANA at 222 S. Prospect Avenue, Park Ridge, IL 60068-4001, or call 708-692-7050.

General. For almost every disease, there is a national or local association or society that publishes patient information. Check your local telephone directory. There are also organized groups of patients with certain illnesses that may be able to provide information about a condition, alternative treatments, and experiences with local doctors and hospitals. Ask your hospital or doctors if they know of any patient groups related to your condition. Also, your local public library has medical reference materials about health care treatments. Many libraries now have Health Information Centers, special sections with books and pamphlets on health and disease. Your librarian also can help you find trusted sources of medical information on the Internet. One such site is Healthfinder (<http://www.healthfinder.gov/>).

