

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Important information about your anaesthetic

Many people will be anxious or concerned before coming to hospital for an operation. This leaflet explains the process of having an anaesthetic and tries to answer common questions along the way.

- *The leaflet is about the specifics of anaesthesia. It therefore does not contain specific information on preparation for coming to hospital, criteria for discharge or care following discharge. The leaflet also does not contain specific information about your surgery.*
- *Other leaflets contain specific information on these topics: please request these if you would like more information on these topics.*

In order for you to be able to consent for anaesthesia it is essential that you read all of this leaflet. If you wish for more information, please request our second leaflet 'More about your anaesthetic' from the Receptionist when you come for pre-operative surgical assessment, or contact the Department of Anaesthesia (see the back page for details).

Who needs an anaesthetic?

If you are having an operation you will need some form of anaesthetic. Some patients will be unconscious (general anaesthetic), while others stay awake for surgery but are kept pain-free with a special injection (local anaesthetic).

What will happen to me?

What happens to you individually will depend on exactly what operation you are having. It is useful to consider the time 'before the operation', 'in theatre' and 'after the operation'.

Before the operation

Who will give the anaesthetic?

Your anaesthetic is administered by an anaesthetist. All anaesthetists are qualified doctors. Trained anaesthetists will have undertaken a long period of training and examinations after medical school in a process identical to physicians and surgeons. Trainee anaesthetists are supervised by trained anaesthetists.

Meeting the anaesthetist

Your anaesthetist will visit you before your surgery. The anaesthetist will ask you questions and explain what happens to you during your time in theatre. This is the best opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have.

'Pre-med'. You may be given drugs before surgery (a 'premed'). This may include a pain-killer, a drug to reduce sickness or a drug to reduce anxiety. If you would like something to relax you before your operation please discuss it with your anaesthetist.

Pre-operative Starvation. You will not be allowed to eat or drink for several hours before your operation (apart from your normal medications, which you should take as normal unless requested not to). This is purely for safety reasons. It is important that your stomach is empty before you are anaesthetised. Please follow instructions you are given prior to admission.

Teeth. Please let the anaesthetist know about any dental problems when you meet. If you have false teeth you will usually be asked to remove them before your anaesthetic. This is for reasons of safety. This can be done in the operating theatre if you wish. Your dentures will be given back to you as soon as you wake up after your operation.

Leaving the ward. When ready you will be taken to theatre on a trolley or walking. You will be asked to confirm who you are and what operation you are having. These careful checks ensure the right person arrives for the right operation.

In theatre

Arriving in the anaesthetic room. In the anaesthetic room you will be asked some questions again, to make sure the right person has arrived and that everyone understands precisely what surgery is planned.

Getting ready to go to sleep. The anaesthetist will insert a fine tube into a vein, usually in your hand. You may find this uncomfortable for a few seconds. All other anaesthetic drugs go through this tube without the need for more needles. You may feel light-headed or sleepy as you are taken into theatre.

In the operating theatre. You will be moved onto the operating table and your anaesthetist will then start your anaesthetic. Monitors are used to help ensure

your safety while you are anaesthetised. These monitors are painlessly attached to you, before you are anaesthetised, and are taken off as you wake up.

What exactly is a general anaesthetic? A general anaesthetic is a drug that makes you temporarily unconscious. You will be given one or several drugs to make you unconscious ('send you to sleep') followed by other drugs to keep you unconscious and safe.

What do they do after I'm anaesthetised? The anaesthetist stays with you throughout your operation and keeps you safe. At the end of surgery the anaesthetist ensures you wake up safely.

Local anaesthetic techniques. Some operations may take place using a local anaesthetic rather than a general anaesthetic. Local anaesthetic methods include spinal and epidural blocks, which involve an injection into the back.

Immediately after your operation. When you wake up, once your condition is stable, you will be transferred to a different room, called the recovery room or PACU. However you may not remember waking up until you reach the recovery room, or even the ward. You will be looked after by a specialised nurse. This nurse will ensure you are safe. If you have any pain or feel sick this will be treated. You will also routinely be given oxygen through a face-mask.

After the operation

Will I be visited by the anaesthetist? The anaesthetist, or a member of their team, will usually visit you after your operation to make sure that your pain is being well controlled, that you are not feeling sick and that there are no problems following your anaesthetic.

Pain relief. All operations may cause pain. Pain-killers will effectively control this and you should usually have nothing more than mild pain. Ask for treatment as soon as you can if you do have pain after your operation. A separate booklet covering special forms of pain relief is available on all wards. Please ask for the '*Pain Busters Booklet*'.

Nausea and vomiting. Some people feel sick after operations, because of the operation, the anaesthetic or other factors such as antibiotics. Some people are particularly sensitive. If you do feel sick after your operation, ask for treatment as soon as you can.

Are anaesthetics safe? Yes, they are very safe. The risk of serious complications from an anaesthetic for a healthy patient is very small indeed.

Complications after anaesthetics. You may have a dry or sore throat or feel light-headed but these symptoms usually settle within 24 hours. Other complications are rare (occurring less than 1 in 100 cases).

Serious complications of general anaesthetics such as feeling the operation, allergy, worsening medical conditions or death are very rare indeed. Some people worry particularly about spinal and epidural anaesthetics. These are also very safe. About 1 in 100 people get a bad headache after an epidural or spinal anaesthetic. The risk of a serious nerve injury (leading to permanent weakness or numbness) is very low indeed and is estimated at about 1 in 20,000 to 100,000 cases (the same as 10-50 per million procedures).

Infection and anaesthesia

General anaesthesia does not increase the risk of infection. However all invasive procedures, including putting in intravenous cannulae or nerve blocks, have a small risk of infection. The anaesthetist will take special precautions to minimise the risk of infection, but this risk cannot be eliminated entirely. As part of the surgical team the anaesthetist will often perform procedures or administer drugs, such as antibiotics, to reduce the risk of infection after surgery.

Going home and getting back to normal

You will be allowed to leave hospital when you are safe and well. As anaesthetic drugs disappear rapidly from your body, these are likely to have little effect on your recovery. However you are advised to take things easy for the first 24 hours after an anaesthetic and should be accompanied by a responsible adult during this time. You should not return to work, operate machinery or drink alcohol, for 24 hours after an anaesthetic. You must not drive a car for a minimum of 48 hours after an anaesthetic. Your insurance will not be valid if you do.

You will normally be given some pain killers to take home with you, and you will receive instructions on how to take them. If you normally take pain killers at home please inform your anaesthetist, so that they may advise you on when to re-start these.

It may take you considerably longer to recover from surgery itself. Your recovery will be helped by getting the right balance between rest and activity. Taking painkillers you have been prescribed will assist you to do this.

The second leaflet 'More about your anaesthetic' covers all the above information in more detail. Particularly there is more information about anaesthetics, anaesthetists and complications after anaesthetics. Several other topics are also covered including anaesthesia for children, intensive care, cancellation of operations, anaesthetic research and contacting the anaesthetic department.

*Dr Tim Cook, Consultant Anaesthetist
January 2008*

More information.

You may obtain more general information from your general practitioner before you arrive in hospital, or from the nurse looking after you on the ward. Further specific information can be obtained by ringing the Department of Anaesthesia (see above). If you have access to the internet the following websites may be helpful

- www.rcoa.ac.uk (Royal College of Anaesthetists). This website includes a lot of information about specific procedures and anaesthetic techniques.
 - General information on your anaesthetic <http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/docs/yaya.pdf>
 - Detailed information on anaesthesia <http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/docs/ae.pdf>
 - Detailed information on specific risks <http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/index.asp?PageID=816>
 - A pictorial aid to understanding risk as described in these leaflets <http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/index.asp?PageID=837>
 - Children's anaesthesia <http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/docs/ycga.pdf>
- www.aagbi.org (Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland)
- www.patients-association.com (Patients Association)

Separate RUH leaflet "More about your anaesthetic" issued January 2008 may be obtained from:

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Larger print copies of the text or a copy of the text on tape can be obtained from Elspeth Alexander at the above address

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Royal United Hospital Bath 
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