

# You and your anaesthetic

**Information  
to help patients  
prepare for an  
anaesthetic**

You can find out more from  
*Anaesthesia explained* and  
[www.youranaesthetic.info](http://www.youranaesthetic.info)

## Questions you may like to ask your anaesthetist

- Q Who will give my anaesthetic?
- Q Do I have to have a general anaesthetic?
- Q What type of anaesthetic do you recommend?
- Q Have you often used this type of anaesthetic?
- Q What are the risks of this type of anaesthetic?
- Q Do I have any special risks?
- Q How will I feel afterwards?

## Tell us what you think

We welcome suggestions to improve this booklet.

You should send these to:

The Patient Information Unit

Churchill House

35 Red Lion Square

London WC1R 4SG

email: [admin@youranaesthetic.info](mailto:admin@youranaesthetic.info)

Second edition January 2003

This leaflet will be reviewed within five years of the date of publication



The Royal College of  
Anaesthetists



The Association of  
Anaesthetists of  
Great Britain and  
Ireland

This leaflet gives basic information to help you prepare for your anaesthetic. It has been written by patients, patient representatives and anaesthetists, working in partnership.

You can find more information in other leaflets in the series. You can get these leaflets, and large print copies, from **www.youranaesthetic.info**. They may also be available from the anaesthetic department in your hospital.

The series will include the following:

- **Anaesthesia explained** (a more detailed booklet)
- **Your child's general anaesthetic**
- **Your spinal anaesthetic**
- **Epidurals for pain relief after surgery**
- **Headache after an epidural or spinal anaesthetic**
- **Your child's general anaesthetic for dental treatment**
- **Local anaesthesia for your eye operation**
- **Your tonsillectomy as day surgery**
- **Your anaesthetic for aortic surgery**
- **Anaesthetic choices for hip and knee replacement**

Throughout this booklet and the leaflets included in the series, we use the following symbols.



To highlight your options or choices.



To highlight where you may want to take particular action.



To point you to more information.

## Some types of anaesthesia

Anaesthesia stops you feeling pain and other sensations. It can be given in various ways and does not always make you unconscious.

**Local anaesthesia** involves injections which numb a small part of your body. You stay conscious but free from pain.

**Regional anaesthesia** involves injections which numb a larger or deeper part of the body. You stay conscious but free from pain.

**General anaesthesia** gives a state of controlled unconsciousness. It is essential for some operations. You are unconscious and feel nothing.

## Anaesthetists

Anaesthetists are doctors with specialist training who:

- discuss types of anaesthesia with you and find out what you would like, helping you to make choices
- discuss the risks of anaesthesia with you
- agree a plan with you for your anaesthetic and pain control
- are responsible for giving your anaesthetic and for your wellbeing and safety throughout your surgery
- manage any blood transfusions you may need
- plan your care, if needed, in the Intensive Care Unit.
- make your experience as pleasant and pain free as possible

## Before coming to hospital



Here are some things that you can do to prepare yourself for your operation:

- **If you smoke**, giving up for several weeks before the operation reduces the risk of breathing problems. The longer you can give up beforehand, the better. If you cannot stop smoking completely, cutting down will help.
- **If you are very overweight**, reducing your weight will reduce many of the risks of having an anaesthetic.
- **If you have loose teeth or crowns**, treatment from your dentist may reduce the risk of damage to your teeth if the anaesthetist needs to put a tube in your throat to help you breathe.
- **If you have a long-standing medical problem** such as diabetes, asthma, thyroid problems, epilepsy or high blood pressure (hypertension) your GP should give you a checkup.

### Before your anaesthetic

You will be asked some questions to check your health before your operation. This may be at a pre-assessment clinic, by filling in a questionnaire, by talking to doctors on the ward, or when you meet your anaesthetist.



It is important for you to bring a list of:

- all the **pills, medicines, herbal remedies or supplements** you are taking, both prescribed and those that you have purchased over the counter
- any **allergies** you may have.

## On the day of your operation



### Nothing to eat or drink – fasting ('Nil by mouth')

The hospital should give you clear instructions about fasting. It is important to follow these. If there is food or liquid in your stomach during your anaesthetic, it could come up to the back of your throat and damage your lungs.



**If you are taking medicines**, you should continue to take them as usual, unless your anaesthetist or surgeon has asked you not to. For example, if you take drugs to stop you getting blood clots (anticoagulants), aspirin, drugs for diabetes or herbal remedies, you will need specific instructions.



**If you feel unwell** when you are due to come into hospital, please telephone the ward for advice.

**Your anaesthetist will meet you before your operation** and will:

- **ask you** about your health
- **discuss with you** which types of anaesthetic can be used
- **discuss with you** the benefits, risks and your preferences
- **decide with you** which anaesthetic would be best for you
- **decide for you**, if you would prefer that.



**Nothing will happen to you until you understand and agree** with what has been planned for you. You have the right to refuse if you do not want the treatment suggested.



### The choice of anaesthetic depends on:

- your operation
- your answers to the questions you have been asked
- your physical condition
- your preferences and the reasons for them
- your anaesthetist's recommendations for you and the reasons for them
- the equipment, staff and other resources at your hospital.

**Premedication** (a 'premed') is the name for drugs which are sometimes given before an anaesthetic. Some premeds prepare your body for the anaesthetic, others help you to relax. They may make you more drowsy after the operation. If you want to go home on the same day, this may be delayed. If you think a premed would help you, ask your anaesthetist.

#### **A needle may be used to start your anaesthetic.**

If this worries you, you can ask to have a local anaesthetic cream put on your arm to numb the skin before you leave the ward. The ward nurses should be able to do this.

**If you are having a local or regional anaesthetic,** you will also need to decide whether you would prefer to:

- be fully alert
- be relaxed and sleepy (**sedation**)
- have a general anaesthetic as well.

Sedation is the use of small amounts of anaesthetic or similar drugs to produce a 'sleepy-like' state.

### When you are called for your operation

- A member of staff will go with you to the theatre.
- **A relative or friend may be able to go with you** to the anaesthetic room. A parent will normally go with a child.
- You can wear your **glasses, hearing aids and dentures** until you are in the anaesthetic room. If you are having a local or regional anaesthetic, you may keep them on.
- **Jewellery and decorative piercing** should ideally be removed. If you cannot remove your jewellery, it can be covered with tape to prevent damage to it or to your skin.
- If you are having a local or regional anaesthetic, you can take a **personal tape** or **CD player** with you to listen to music through your headphones.
- **Most people go to theatre on a bed or trolley.** You may be able to walk. If you are walking, you will need your dressing gown and slippers.
- Theatre staff will check your identification bracelet, your name and date of birth, and will ask you about other details in your medical records as a final check that you are having the right operation.



### The operating department ('theatres')

Most anaesthetics are started in the **anaesthetic room**. The anaesthetist will attach machines which measure your heart rate, blood pressure and oxygen levels.

When the anaesthetic has started, you will go through to the **operating theatre** for the operation.

## Local and regional anaesthetics

- Your anaesthetist will ask you to keep quite still while the injections are given.
- You may notice a warm tingling feeling as the anaesthetic begins to take effect.
- Your operation will only go ahead when you and your anaesthetist are sure that the area is numb.
- If you are not having sedation you will remain alert and aware of your surroundings. A screen shields the operating site, so you will not see the operation unless you want to.
- Your anaesthetist is always near to you and you can speak to him or her whenever you want to.

## General anaesthetics

There are two ways of starting a general anaesthetic.

- anaesthetic drugs may be injected into a vein through the cannula (this is generally used for adults);
- you can breathe anaesthetic gases and oxygen through a mask, which you may hold if you prefer.

Once you are unconscious, an anaesthetist stays with you at all times and continues to give you drugs to keep you anaesthetised.

As soon as the operation is finished, the drugs will be stopped or reversed so that you regain consciousness.

After the operation, you may be taken to the **recovery room**. Recovery staff will be with you at all times. When they are satisfied that you have recovered safely from your anaesthetic you will be taken back to the ward.

## Pain relief afterwards

Good pain relief is important and some people need more pain relief than others. It is much easier to relieve pain if it is dealt with **before** it gets bad. Pain relief can be increased, given more often, or given in different combinations.



Occasionally, pain is a warning sign that all is not well, so you should ask for help when you feel pain.

Here are some ways of giving pain relief:

- **Pills, tablets or liquids to swallow**  
These are used for all types of pain. They take at least half an hour to work. You need to be able to eat, drink and not feel sick for these drugs to work.
- **Injections**  
These are often needed, and are given either into a vein for immediate effect, or into your leg or buttock muscle. If in a muscle they may take up to 20 minutes to work.
- **Suppositories**  
These waxy pellets are put in your back passage (rectum). The pellet dissolves and the drug passes into the body. They are useful if you cannot swallow or if you might vomit.
- **Patient-controlled analgesia (PCA)**  
This is a method using a machine that allows you to control your pain relief yourself. If you would like more information ask for a leaflet on PCA.
- **Local anaesthetics and regional blocks**  
These types of anaesthesia can be very useful for relieving pain after surgery. More details can be found in the leaflet *Epidurals for pain relief after surgery*.



## What will I feel like afterwards?

How you feel will depend on the type of anaesthetic and operation you have had, how much pain relieving medicine you need and your general health. Side effects are listed opposite.

## Understanding risk

In modern anaesthesia, serious problems are uncommon. Risk cannot be removed completely, but modern equipment, training and drugs have made it a much safer procedure in recent years.

### To understand a risk, you must know:

- how likely it is to happen
- how serious it could be
- how it can be treated.

### The risk to you as an individual will depend on:

- whether you have any other illness
- personal factors, such as smoking or being overweight
- surgery which is complicated, long or done in an emergency.

### People vary in how they interpret words and numbers.

This scale is provided to help.



## Side effects and complications



More information on the side effects and complications listed here is in *Anaesthesia explained*.

RA = This may occur with a regional anaesthetic.

GA = This may occur with a general anaesthetic.

### Very common and common side effects

RA	GA	Feeling sick and vomiting after surgery
	GA	Sore throat
RA	GA	Dizziness, blurred vision
RA	GA	Headache
RA	GA	Itching
RA	GA	Aches, pains and backache
RA	GA	Pain during injection of drugs
RA	GA	Bruising and soreness
	GA	Confusion or memory loss

### Uncommon side effects and complications

	GA	Chest infection
RA	GA	Bladder problems
	GA	Muscle pains
RA	GA	Slow breathing (depressed respiration)
	GA	Damage to teeth, lips or tongue
RA	GA	An existing medical condition getting worse
	GA	Awareness (becoming conscious during your operation)

### Rare or very rare complications

	GA	Damage to the eyes
RA	GA	Serious allergy to drugs
RA	GA	Nerve damage
RA	GA	Death
RA	GA	Equipment failure

Deaths caused by anaesthesia are very rare, and are usually caused by a combination of 4 or 5 complications together. There are probably about five deaths for every million anaesthetics in the UK.