

Facts Sheet

Important Questions to Ask About Your Surgery

Please Read This Sheet Before You Agree to Your Operation.

Are you facing surgery? You are not alone. Thousands of Australians have surgery each year. Most operations are not emergencies. This means you have time to ask your surgeon questions about the operation and time to decide whether to have it, and if so, when and where.

This information does not apply to emergency surgery.

Your referring doctor believes that you may need surgery. However, before you agree to an operation, you should ask your doctor or surgeon these important questions. The answers to these questions will help you understand more about your operation so you can make the best decision for you.

Remember, if you do not understand the answers, it is important to ask your doctor to explain them again.

Why do I need an operation?

Ask your doctor and surgeon to explain what is wrong with you so that you can understand how the operation fits in with your medical condition. 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 performed to diagnose a problem. Surgery can also save your life. Your surgeon will tell you the purpose of your operation.

What type of operation do I need?

Ask your surgeon to explain what will happen during the operation. For example, if something is going to be repaired or taken out, find out why.

Your surgeon can draw a picture and explain what will happen. Ask your surgeon where the cuts will be and how big they could be.

Ask if there are other ways of doing the operation. One way may need bigger surgery than another. Ask why your surgeon wants to do the operation one way over another.

Your surgeon will perform the surgery that you have agreed to that is written on your consent form to correct your medical condition.

However, if a serious complication happens, your Surgeon will do whatever is necessary to save your life.

What kind of anaesthesia will I need and what are the risks?

Anaesthesia is used so that surgery can be performed without unnecessary pain. Your anaesthetist will discuss with you the type of anaesthesia required, and why you should have this type.

Anaesthesia is quite safe for most patients and is usually given by an anaesthetist. Ask what the side effects and risks are for you. Be sure to tell the doctor what medical problems you have including allergies and any medications (including herbal medications) you have been taking. These may affect how the anaesthesia works.

What are the risks of this operation?

All operations have some risk. This is why you need to look at both the risks and the benefits before you make a decision. Ask your surgeon to explain these risks.

Some people have an increased risk of complications because of other medical conditions. Ask your surgeon what risks you have and why.

What are the complications of this operation?

Ask your surgeon about the possible complications and side effects of the operation. There is usually some pain with surgery. Ask how much there will be and what the doctors and nurses will do to reduce the pain. Controlling the pain will help you feel more comfortable, get well faster, and improve the results of your operation.

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 operations, the benefits only last a short time. You might need a second operation later. For other operations, 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 results.

Are there alternatives to surgery?

Sometimes, surgery is not the only answer to a health problem. Medicines or other non-surgical treatments, such as a change in diet or special exercises, might help you just as much or more.

Another option may be "watchful waiting," in which you and your doctor check to see if your problem gets better or worse. If it gets worse, you may need surgery right away. If it gets better, you may need surgery later, or not at all.

Ask your surgeon or doctor what other treatments there are, the benefits and risks, and if they are available to you.

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?

What if I am uncertain about the surgery?

If you have any doubts about your surgery, you may need to have another appointment with your GP or the surgeon. If you are still uncertain, it may be necessary for you to arrange for a second opinion with another surgeon.

Who will do the operation and what are their skills?

Ask your surgeon who will be doing the operation. The surgeon works in a team and other doctors, who have the necessary experience, may do part or all of the operation as part of their training program. If you are worried about this, tell your surgeon. Ask your surgeon about his or her recent success and complications with

this operation. You can ask your doctor about the success rate at the hospital you are going to. If the hospital has a low success rate for this operation, you might choose to ask if you can have it at another hospital.

How long will it take me to recover?

Today, a lot of surgery is done at a day surgery unit of a hospital. Ask if your operation will be done as day surgery. If not, ask when you will have to come in to hospital and how long you will be there. Your surgeon can tell you how you might feel and what you will be able to do in the first few days, weeks or months after the operation. Ask when you can start regular exercise again and go back to your usual routine. Make sure you follow your surgeon's advice. You do not want to do anything that will slow your recovery. Find out what kind of supplies, equipment, and any other help you will need when you go home.

Do you want more information about your surgery?

Useful links

http://www.health.qld.gov.au/quality/10_Tips/default.asp
This information is also available in multiple languages.

Free booklets on what you should know about anaesthesia is available on the internet from the Australian Society of Anaesthetists.

<http://www.asa.org.au/page.aspx?A=5461>

For information on Queensland Health Interpreter Service go to:

http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/QHIS_what_expect.asp

Acknowledgements to: Be Informed: Questions to Ask Your Doctor Before You Have Surgery. AHCPR Publication No. 95-0027, Jan 1995. Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, Rockville, MD.