



Having Surgery? What You Need to Know

Questions To Ask Your Doctor and Your Surgeon

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 document 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. Select for 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 (for example, laparoscopic surgery).

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.

Learn About Benefits & 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?