



Preparing for Surgery

If you are planning to have surgery, major or minor, you will need to know some basic facts. Each type of operation — like each patient — differs a little. The steps vary with the setting and the nature of the surgery.

PLANNING AHEAD

Once you've found out that you need surgery, you'll need some details. You'll want to know where and when it will take place and what you should do in advance.

Outpatient surgery does not always take place in a hospital. It may be done in a doctor's office, surgical center or clinic.

Inpatient surgery takes place in a hospital. In most cases, the patient checks in on the day of surgery and remains for a few days or more after surgery.

If you smoke, stop smoking before your operation. Any period of not smoking helps.

If you are taking medication, ask your doctor if you should keep taking it before or after the operation.

Follow a special diet or take iron supplements before your surgery if your doctor suggests it.

Take it easy. Try not to get too tired in the days before and after your operation.

BEFORE SURGERY

You will be asked to arrive early to prepare for surgery. You should have an empty stomach before an operation. It is best not to eat or drink for six to eight hours before your surgery. Leave jewelry and other things of value at home.

You will be asked to fill out some forms about how you will pay for the surgery. If you have insurance, it will help to have your card ready.

You will be given an ID bracelet. It will include your name, room number and doctor's name.

Your health history, as well as any drug allergies, may be noted.

Your doctor must explain what is involved in your treatment before you can agree to it. This process is called informed consent.

THE HEALTH CARE TEAM

A team headed by your doctor and made up of a number of health care professionals will work together to care for you before, during and after your operation. Interns and residents on the team are doctors who have finished medical school. They are gaining special training by working with your doctor. During the surgery, a resident or another doctor may help your doctor.

The anesthesiologist is the person who is in charge of giving anesthesia and keeping a check on its effects.

Nurses will assist your doctor during surgery, perform special tasks, and help make you more comfortable.

PREOP PREP

Just before surgery, preop prep (for preoperative preparation) takes place. The steps vary, but this is what you can expect:

The part of your body where the doctor will operate will be cleaned and may be shaved.

You may be given a laxative or an enema to empty your bowels.

You'll be asked to remove any of the following items:

- Dentures and bridges
- Hearing aids
- Contact lenses and glasses
- Nail polish
- Wigs, hairpins, combs and barrettes
- Jewelry

You'll be asked to remove all your clothes. You will put on a special gown and maybe a cap.

You will be taken to an area where you'll wait until the surgical team is ready for you.

You may be given medication to help you relax.

A needle may be placed into a vein in your arm or wrist. This needle is attached to a tube that will supply your body with fluids, medication or blood during and after the surgery. This is called an intravenous (IV) line.

A tube called a catheter may be placed in your bladder to drain urine.

ANESTHESIA

After you have been taken into the operating room, you will be moved to the operating table. Monitors will be attached to your chest, arms and other parts of your body before the anesthetic is given.

Any anesthesia carries some risks. The drugs and techniques used today are pretty safe, though. If you are concerned, talk to your doctor or anesthesiologist. The choice of anesthesia will depend on the type of operation, the state of your health, your wishes and other factors.

General anesthesia makes you unconscious.

Regional anesthesia does not make you unconscious. It works by blocking feeling in a region of the body.

Local anesthesia is given by a shot from a needle into the area where the doctor will operate. It does not numb as large an area as a regional anesthetic does.

AFTER THE OPERATION

Once the operation is over, you will be moved into the recovery area. This area is equipped to monitor patients after surgery.

RECOVERY

Pain is a normal part of the healing process after an operation. During your recovery, you should have enough pain relievers to keep you comfortable.

Fluids may be given through an IV line.

As your strength returns, the doctors and nurses will have you move around as much as you can.

You may feel tired and weak at first. The sooner you resume activity, the sooner your body's functions can get back to normal.

GOING HOME

After outpatient surgery, you will most likely be able to go home within a few hours.

If you've had major inpatient surgery, it will most likely take a month or more before you are ready to resume your normal schedule.

Finally...

Facing an operation can make you nervous. Knowing what to expect will help you feel more at ease. Each surgery is unique. Your doctor can provide details and answer any questions you may have.