

PATIENT EDUCATION: ANESTHESIA

What is anesthesia?

Anesthesia controls pain during surgery or other medical procedures. It includes using medicines, and sometimes close monitoring, to keep you comfortable. It can also help control breathing, blood pressure, blood flow, and heart rate and rhythm, when needed.

An anesthesiologist or a nurse anesthetist takes charge of your comfort and safety during surgery. This topic focuses on anesthesia care that you get from these specialists.

Anesthesia may be used to:

- Relax you.
- Block pain.
- Make you sleepy or forgetful.
- Make you unconscious for your surgery.

Other medicines also may be used to relax your muscles during surgery.

What are the types of anesthesia?

- **Local anesthesia** numbs a small part of the body. You get a shot of medicine (anesthetic) directly into the surgical area to block pain. Sometimes the doctor will apply a numbing medicine to part of your body, such as your nose or mouth. Local anesthesia is used only for minor procedures. You may stay awake during the procedure, or you may get medicine to help you relax or sleep.
- **Regional anesthesia** blocks pain to a larger part of your body. Anesthetic is injected around major nerves or the spinal cord. You may get medicine to help you relax or sleep. Major types of regional anesthesia include:
 - **Peripheral nerve blocks.** A nerve block is a shot of anesthetic near a specific nerve or group of nerves. It blocks pain in the part of the body supplied by the nerve. Nerve blocks are most often used for procedures on the hands, arms, feet, legs, or face.
 - **Epidural and spinal anesthesia.** This is a shot of anesthetic near the spinal cord and the nerves that connect to it. It blocks pain from an entire region of the body, such as the belly, hips, or legs.
- **General anesthesia** affects the brain as well as the entire body. You may get it through a vein (intravenously, or IV), or you may breathe it in. With general anesthesia, you are completely unaware and do not feel pain during the surgery. General anesthesia often causes you to forget the surgery and the time right after it.

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What determines the type of anesthesia used?

The type of anesthesia used depends on several things:

- Your past and current health. The doctor or nurse will consider other surgeries you have had and the health problems you have, such as heart disease, lung disease, or diabetes. You also will be asked whether you or any family members have had an allergic reaction to any anesthetics or other medicines.
- The reason for your surgery and the type of surgery.
- The results of tests, such as blood tests or an electrocardiogram (EKG, ECG).

Your doctor or nurse may prefer one type of anesthesia over another for your surgery. In some cases, your doctor or nurse may let you choose which type to have. Sometimes, such as in an emergency, you do not get to choose.

What are the potential risks and complications of anesthesia?

Major side effects and other problems of anesthesia are not common, especially in people who are in good health overall. But all anesthesia has some risk. Your specific risks depend on the type of anesthesia you get, your health, and how you respond to the medicines used.

Some health problems increase your chances of problems from anesthesia. Your doctor or nurse will tell you which of your health problems could affect your care.

Your doctor or nurse will closely watch your vital signs, such as your blood pressure and heart rate, during anesthesia and surgery so that you can avoid most side effects and problems.

How should you prepare for anesthesia?

Make sure you get a list of instructions to help you prepare for your surgery. Your surgeon will also let you know what will happen when you get to the clinic or hospital, during surgery, and afterward.

Your doctor will tell you when to stop eating and drinking before your surgery. When you stop depends on your health problem and the type of anesthesia that will be used. If you take any medicines regularly, ask your doctor or nurse if you should take your medicines on the day before or the day of your surgery.

You have to give your consent to be given anesthesia. Your doctor or nurse will discuss the best type of anesthesia for you and review risks, benefits, and other choices.

Many people are nervous before they have anesthesia and surgery. Mental relaxation methods as well as medicines can help you relax.

What happens when you are recovering from anesthesia?

Right after surgery you will be taken to the recovery room. Nurses will care for you there under the direction of a CRNA. A nurse will check your vital signs and any bandages and ask about how much pain you have. If you are in pain, don't be afraid to say so.

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Some effects of anesthesia may last for many hours after surgery. If you had local or regional anesthesia, you may have some numbness or reduced feeling in part of your body. Your muscle control and coordination may also be affected.

Other common side effects of anesthesia are closely watched and managed to reduce your discomfort. These side effects include:

- Nausea and vomiting. In most cases, this can be treated and does not last long.
- A mild drop in body temperature. You may feel cold and may shiver when you first wake up.

For minor surgeries, you may go home the same day. For more complicated surgeries, you may have to move to a hospital room to continue your recovery. If you stay in the hospital, your doctor or nurse will visit you to check on your recovery from anesthesia and answer any questions you have.