

General Anaesthetic

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This fact sheet is for general information about this procedure only. It is not intended to be used as medical advice or to replace advice that your relevant healthcare professional would give you. If you have a particular medical problem, please consult a healthcare professional.

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What is a general anaesthetic?

A general anaesthetic is a combination of drugs that produce deep sleep. It is used for operations or procedures as it causes a loss of sensation. You will not be aware of what is happening and afterwards you will not remember anything that has happened.

What are the benefits of a general anaesthetic?

You need to have an operation or procedure. So that your surgeon or doctor can perform the operation safely, you need to be in a state where you do not move and your muscles are relaxed. A safe way to achieve this is to give you a general anaesthetic.

Are there any alternatives to a general anaesthetic?

Other forms of anaesthesia include injections near the area of surgery (local anaesthetic) or injections of local anaesthetic near major nerves or your spinal cord (regional, epidural or spinal anaesthetic). Local anaesthetics will numb the area to be operated on but you will be awake or under sedation for the operation.

How is a general anaesthetic given?

Most people are sent to sleep by injecting the anaesthetic through a drip (small tube) in a vein. It takes about 30 seconds to work.

For some people it may be more appropriate to go to sleep by breathing an anaesthetic gas through a face mask. This also takes about 30 seconds to work.

You will be kept asleep either by giving you more of the same anaesthetic into the vein or by breathing anaesthetic gases.

When the operation has finished, the anaesthetic wears off, allowing you to wake up again. You may feel some pressure in your throat for a short time as you wake up.

Is a general anaesthetic safe?

A general anaesthetic is safe for most people.

Your anaesthetist may need to do some tests before the operation to assess how safe a general anaesthetic is for you. The tests will vary and may include the following.

- Blood tests to check for anaemia (your body not producing enough healthy red blood cells)
- ECG (electrocardiogram) to record the electric activity of your heart
- Lung-function tests
- X-rays or other similar tests

How can I prepare myself for the operation?

Keeping warm

It is important to keep warm around the time of the operation. The healthcare team will take steps to keep you warm when you are having the operation.

The hospital may be colder than your home, so bring extra clothing or a dressing gown.

Lifestyle changes

If you smoke, stopping smoking now may reduce your risk of developing complications and will improve your long-term health.

Try to maintain a healthy weight. You have a higher risk of developing complications if you are overweight.

Regular exercise should help to prepare you for the operation, help you to recover and improve your long-term health. Before you start exercising, ask the healthcare team or your GP for advice.

What complications can happen?

Some complications can be serious and can even cause death.

Minor complications (not disabling or life-threatening)

- Feeling or being sick after the operation
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Muscle and back pains

- Dental damage
- Difficulty passing urine
- Reduced effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives

Serious complications

- Loss or change of hearing
- Eye injury
- Nerve injury
- Heart attack
- Stroke
- Chest infection and other breathing problems
- Allergic reaction

How soon will I recover?

A general anaesthetic can affect your judgement and reactions for 24 hours.

If you are fit and maintain a healthy weight, you are more likely to do well after having a general anaesthetic.

Summary

A general anaesthetic is usually a safe and effective way for you to have an operation or procedure.

Most people do not have any problems and are satisfied with their anaesthetic.

Keep this information document. Use it to help you if you need to talk to the healthcare team.

Some information, such as risk and complication statistics, is taken from global studies and/or databases. Please ask your surgeon or doctor for more information about the risks that are specific to you, and they may be able to tell you about any other suitable treatments options.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare team would give you.

Acknowledgements

Reviewer

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