

Anaesthesia – Patient Information

Anaesthesia means "loss of sensation". Medications that cause anaesthesia are called anaesthetics.

Anaesthetics are used during tests and surgical operations to numb sensation in certain areas of the body or induce sleep.

This prevents pain and discomfort and enables a wide range of medical procedures to be carried out.

Local anaesthetics and general anaesthetics are two commonly used types of anaesthetics:

- local anaesthetic is where a small area of the body is numbed and you remain fully conscious – often used during minor procedures
- general anaesthetic is where you're totally unconscious and unaware of the procedure – often used for more serious operations

How anaesthetics work

Anaesthetics work by stopping the nerve signals that keep you awake and aware from reaching your brain.

During this state of induced sleep, procedures can be carried out without you feeling anything.

After the anaesthetic has worn off, the nerve signals will be able to reach your brain, and consciousness and feeling will return.

Types of anaesthesia

As well as local and general anaesthetic, there are several other types of anaesthesia.

Unlike general anaesthetic, these do not make you unconscious – they just stop you feeling pain in a particular area of your body.

The different types of anaesthetic are:

- **regional anaesthetic** – a local anaesthetic given to a specific region of your body, leading to numbness or pain relief for deeper operations where more extensive numbness is needed
- **epidural anaesthesia** – a type of regional anaesthetic usually used to numb the lower half of the body; for example, as pain relief during labour and childbirth
- **spinal anaesthetic** – a type of regional anaesthetic used to give total numbness, lasting about 3 hours, to the lower parts of the body, such as in the base of your spine or in your lower back, so surgery can be safely carried out in this area
- **sedation** – medication that makes you feel sleepy and relaxes you both physically and mentally; it's sometimes used to keep you calm during minor, painful or unpleasant procedures

Different types of anaesthesia can be used in combination. For example, a regional anaesthetic can be used with a general anaesthetic to relieve pain after an operation.

A sedative is also sometimes used with a regional anaesthetic to help you feel relaxed and calm, as well as pain-free, during an operation.

How anaesthetics are given

An anaesthetic can be given in a number of ways:

- as an ointment, spray or drops
- as an injection into a vein
- as a gas you breathe in

Anaesthetists

Anaesthetists are doctors who have received specialist training in anaesthesia. They'll give you your anaesthetic and be responsible for your safety and wellbeing during your procedure.

Before the procedure, your anaesthetist will discuss a number of things with you, including:

- the type of anaesthesia for the procedure you're having
- any risks or side effects associated with the type of anaesthesia you're having

They will discuss pain control with you, taking into account any preferences you have. You should ask your anaesthetist to clarify anything you're unsure about.

Your anaesthetist will carefully monitor you throughout your operation and make sure you wake up comfortably afterwards. They may also help with any pain relief you might need after the procedure.

What are the risks of general or regional anaesthesia?

In modern anaesthesia, serious problems are uncommon. Risk cannot be removed completely, but modern drugs, equipment and training have made anaesthesia a much safer procedure in recent years. Anaesthetists take a lot of care to avoid all the risks outlined in this section. Your anaesthetist will be able to give you more information about any of these risks and the precautions taken to avoid them.

Very common (1 in 10 people) and common side effects (1 in 100 people)

- Feeling sick and vomiting after surgery
- Sore throat
- Dizziness, blurred vision
- Headache
- Bladder problems
- Damage to lips or tongue (usually minor)
- Itching
- Aches, pains and backache
- Pain during injection of drugs
- Bruising and soreness
- Temporary confusion or memory loss
- Shivering



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Uncommon side effects and complications (1 in 1000 people)

- Chest infection
- Muscle pains
- Slow breathing (depressed respiration)
- Damage to teeth
- An existing medical condition getting worse
- Awareness (becoming conscious during your operation)

Rare (1 in 10,000 people) and very rare (1 in 100,000 people) complications

- Damage to the eyes
- Heart attack or stroke
- Serious allergy to drugs
- Nerve damage
- Death
- Equipment failure

Deaths caused by anaesthesia are very rare, occurring only in a small number of cases, usually due to several complications occurring together.

Should you have any further questions, you can discuss them with your anaesthetist on admission or with the nurse who will conduct your pre- operative assessment.