

Sickness after surgery

Some people worry about feeling or being sick after an operation. This leaflet answers the questions that patients often ask. It has been developed with the help of patients within the trust.

Is everyone sick after an operation?

No. Roughly one third (30%) of patients may experience some sickness after an operation under a general anaesthetic.

What causes sickness after operation?

A number of factors can be involved. Some patients are more susceptible (see below). Certain operations carry a higher risk of sickness. Finally, both the anaesthetic and stronger pain-relieving drugs may cause sickness in some patients.

Can anything be done to help?

Yes. If we know that you are more likely to suffer sickness after your operation, your anaesthetist can give you anti-sickness medicines and modify your anaesthetic to try and prevent or minimise sickness. If you feel sick after your operation, please tell us straight away. Anti-sickness medicines are available which will normally help. Patients with a very high risk of sickness may be written up for regular anti-sickness medicines for the first twenty-four hours after surgery.

How can I tell if I am more likely to have sickness after my operation?

Women are more than twice as likely as men to experience sickness after surgery.

If you have **previously suffered sickness after surgery**, or if you suffer badly from **travel sickness**, you are much more likely to experience sickness whenever you have surgery under a general anaesthetic.

Curiously, smokers are less likely to suffer sickness after surgery. So, if you are a non-smoker, unfortunately, you are at increased risk. (If you do smoke, this is not a reason for continuing to smoke up to the day of your operation. Smokers have a higher incidence of chest and breathing problems, as well as heart and circulatory problems during and after a general anaesthetic. You should avoid smoking for at least 12 hours before surgery and ideally stop up to a week or so before your operation).

If you are having **more major surgery** which will require **stronger pain relieving drugs**, like morphine, you are more likely to suffer sickness.

Finally, if you are having **certain types of surgery**, including laparoscopy, hysterectomy, gall bladder surgery, major abdominal surgery, tonsillectomy, major ear surgery or squint surgery, you are more likely to suffer sickness.

How can I make sure that the doctors and nurses looking after me know I am more likely to suffer sickness after surgery?

There are a number of opportunities for the staff to detect that you are more likely to suffer sickness after your operation.

More and more patients are seen at pre-assessment clinic before routine planned surgery.

When you are admitted for your operation, your details will be checked by your nurse.

You will be seen by an anaesthetist (normally the one who will be looking after you) before your operation.

At each of these stages you will be asked questions which will help us to plan your care, including prevention or treatment of sickness after operation. Please tell us if you have had this problem before, or if you have particular concerns about sickness after your surgery.

Can I do anything to avoid feeling sick after my operation?

Yes, try to avoid sudden movements. When you sit up or get out of bed, move slowly and smoothly. When you start to drink, take small sips and build up slowly. Eat small, light meals to start with.

If you do feel sick, take slow, deep breaths to reduce the sensation. Most importantly, tell a nurse as soon as you feel the slightest bit sick.

Post-operative sickness after surgery

Six tips for patients

- Warn us if you had sickness after a previous operation
- Tell your nurse straight away if you are feeling sick
- Move slowly and smoothly
- Drink small sips to start
- Eat little, light and often
- Try taking deep breaths if you are feeling sick

Sources of information

Specialist Nurse in Pain Management (at Conquest Hospital 0300 131 4500 ext. 8340, at Eastbourne DGH 0300 131 4500 ext. 3745)

Additional Information can be found on the Royal College of Anaesthetists patient information website www.rcoa.ac.uk/patient-information

Search under Patient Information, then under patient information resources click 'Anaesthesia and risk', click 'Risk leaflets', then click 'Feeling sick'.

Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the patient experience team on 0300 131 4784 or esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net.

Hand hygiene

We are committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Other formats

If you require any of our leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department on 0300 131 4434 or esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net.

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

This leaflet contains advice which is based on information collected by the Acute Pain Service at Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham and published in The Effective Prevention and Management of Post-operative Nausea and Vomiting, second edition, 2003.

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The clinical specialty/unit that has agreed this patient information leaflet:
Diagnostic, Anaesthetic and Surgery

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