



## Tips About Elective Surgery

GHI cares about your health. If you need elective surgery, it is very important to know the right questions to ask your surgeon so you can have the safest and most appropriate operation. GHI believes that if you are prepared, your surgical experience will be more successful.

Most operations are not emergencies and are considered elective surgery. This means that you have time to learn about your operation. Speaking to your surgeon and asking appropriate questions will help ensure the best and safest outcome. Your doctor should welcome your questions. Ask your doctor to explain anything you do not understand. Bring a friend or relative with you when you talk with the doctor.

### Questions to Ask Your Doctor and/or Surgeon

#### **Why do I need an operation? What operation are you recommending? Is there more than one way of doing the operation?**

Surgery may be needed to relieve pain, or to find or fix a problem. There may be other surgical or non-surgical ways to do this. Some conditions, such as hernias, are corrected by surgery, while medication or non-surgical remedies treat other illnesses. There is often more than one surgical procedure to correct your problem. Ask about the different types. For example, ask which operation is the most frequently done and which ones are new or experimental. Also, ask how much experience your surgeon has in the different procedures.

#### **What kind of anesthesia will I need?**

Your surgeon can tell you whether the operation calls for local, regional, or general anesthesia and why this form of anesthesia is best for your procedure. Ask whether you will have the chance to speak with an anesthesiologist before your operation. Be prepared to ask the anesthesiologist as many questions as you need for you to feel comfortable.

#### **What are the risks of having the operation?**

You need to weigh the benefits of the operation against the risks of complications or side effects. Typical complications are infection, excessive bleeding, a reaction to anesthesia, or accidental injury. Your surgeon can tell you what complications or side effects are more common to your specific procedure and how often they occur. There is almost always some pain with surgery. Ask your surgeon how much pain to expect and how your pain will be treated. Pain medication will help you feel more comfortable while you heal, and improve the results of your operation.

## **How do I prepare for the surgery?**

You need to tell your doctor or surgeon if you are taking any medications or supplements. You may have to stop or change some of them before surgery. Make sure you report the exact name and dosage of the drugs you are taking. Also, be sure to tell your surgeon about any over-the-counter medications or herbal preparations you are taking. These types of products can affect the safety of your surgery. Make sure to describe any drug allergy, sensitivity to latex or reaction to anesthesia you may have.

## **How can I help ensure the safety of my surgery?**

Ask your surgeon to mark the site he or she will operate on by writing directly on your skin. Marking the surgical site is the best way to prevent surgery on the wrong part of the body. Also ask your surgeon when you should stop eating or drinking before having general anesthesia. You should stop smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking illicit drugs before surgery to avoid their side effects.

## **Are there alternatives to surgery?**

Surgery is not always the only answer to a medical problem. Medicines or other treatments, such as a different medication, change in diet or special exercises, might help just as well. One alternative to surgery may be watchful waiting. During this time, your doctor and you check to see if your problem gets better or worse. You need to know about the benefits and risks of each treatment option to make the best decision.

## **Where will the surgery be done? How long will I be there?**

If appropriate for your condition, outpatient surgery may be more convenient. If your doctor recommends that you have inpatient surgery for a procedure usually done in an outpatient facility – or recommends an outpatient procedure that is usually done as inpatient surgery – ask why. If the surgery is done in the hospital, ask your surgeon how many days you will be there.

## **What do I need to do at home to prepare for my surgery? How long will it take me to recover?**

Your surgeon can tell you how you might feel and what you will be able to do—or not do – the first few days, weeks, or months after surgery. He or she will tell you how long your recovery usually takes, if you will need help at home, and if you will need any special supplies or equipment. Ask about using stairs or lifting or carrying packages. Ask when you will be able to go back to work and/or start your regular activities again. Think about buying extra groceries before the operation.

GHI hopes this information is useful. We know that the better informed you are about your elective surgery, the safer and more satisfied you will be with your outcome.

Additional information to help you prepare for surgery is available from the American College of Surgeons at [http://www.facs.org/public\\_info/ppserv.html](http://www.facs.org/public_info/ppserv.html). Additional helpful articles are available on the GHI Web site at [www.ghi.com](http://www.ghi.com).

Adapted from *Having Surgery? What You Need to Know*, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.