

Preparing Yourself for Surgery

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Health Focus Contributor

Surgery: the mere mention of the word is likely to evoke a flood of powerful and sometimes conflicting emotions.

Carl actually felt somewhat relieved. After suffering chest pain and shortness of breath for many months, he believed that open-heart surgery would allow him to regain a normal lifestyle.

For Emily, the prospect of having bone and joint removed in order to receive a hip prosthesis was traumatic. She avoided the procedure until she could no longer tolerate the pain and disability.

With longer life expectancy and improved medical technology, it's likely that at sometime in your life you'll have to consider the prospect of undergoing surgery.

The all-important first step is making sure you want surgery. For more information on which to base your decision, getting a second opinion may or may not be a good idea. If you were to get a second opinion it may result in delaying your surgery or it may require a third opinion if the first and second have different opinions.

If you do so, make sure your medical records go to the second doctor so you can avoid repeating medical tests. After getting a second opinion, feel free to re-visit the first doctor –or a third-if you still have questions or reservations.

At Home or Away?

A few decades ago, it was routine practice for anyone having major surgery such as heart bypass or prostatectomy to travel to a major research center such as the Mayo Clinic or Johns Hopkins Medical Center. Today, it's likely that your local hospital, or one nearby, has the equipment and trained staff required for even the most specialized procedures.

Experience, of course, is always an issue. Practice makes perfect, and studies have demonstrated that surgical outcomes correlate directly with the number of procedures

performed.

Wherever the procedure is to be performed, it doesn't hurt to make inquiries and go on the Internet to do research. Is the hospital accredited? How many of these specific procedures are performed there each year? What is the complication rate and how does that rate compare to the national average?

Is the surgeon board certified? Ever been disciplined or had his or her license suspended? If you've had family or friends who have had the same procedure, you might want to talk with them about their experiences.

Going out of town requires making special travel arrangements for yourself and whoever might be accompanying you. Think about how being away from home will affect your experience. If possible, try to visit the wing of the hospital where you'll be recuperating. Visualizing your environment is one way of relieving stress. If you get a cold, sore throat or fever just before surgery, be sure to report it. A delay in surgery means little compared to the possible complications. You'll probably be asked to fast for a certain period before surgery. And bathing prior to surgery decreases the bacteria that may be on your skin and reduces your risk of infection.

Downsizing Surgery

Many procedures that once required general anesthesia and a hospital stay of several days can now be performed in an outpatient clinic with regional or local anesthesia. With smaller incisions and endoscopic surgery, pain, risk and recovery time may be reduced... but not eliminated.

Depending on the procedure, you'll probably have to deal with limited mobility and some foggy thinking as you go through rehabilitation. It's important, however, to follow instructions and get back into normal activities as soon as possible. Healing is promoted by controlled physical activity, not prolonged bed rest.

With the current cost-cutting environment, you don't need to worry about lingering in the hospital overlong. Most individuals are happier when allowed to recuperate in their home environment any way, but they should count on needing significant help from family and friends.

Think about what kind of help you'll need. Will you be able to go up and down

stairs? Bathe and dress yourself? You'll certainly need help with cooking, shopping and household chores.

Don't be shy about asking for and accepting help. Studies show that persons who have a strong support network are healthier and live much longer than those who are isolated. The period right before and right after surgery is a good time to build and test your network.

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