
About Your Anesthetic

Anesthesiologists - who are they and what do they do?

Anesthesiologists are doctors with special training in giving anesthetics, controlling pain and treating serious medical illnesses often during emergency situations. Their goal is your safety and comfort before, during, and after your operation. Your anesthesiologist will offer you the anesthetic options which best suit you and your operation. As with any medical procedure, there are risks and complications which will be discussed with you by the anesthesiologist prior to your operation. After receiving the facts, you will be taking part in making the decision about which option to use.

Anesthesia is intended to prevent you from feeling pain and other unpleasant sensations during surgery. Anesthetic drugs are of several types and may be given in various ways. While you may not be completely unconscious for all types of surgery, you will be kept comfortable and may not recall much of your experience. The types of anesthesia chosen are based on factors such as your physical condition, the types of medication you are taking and the nature of your surgery. The medicine is given to you by an anesthesiologist.

What anesthesia options could be available?

The types of anesthesia are referred to as local, regional, and general. They can be used independently and are combined in many cases. Local and regional anesthesia is often referred to as being given a “nerve block” or a “spinal”.

Local anesthesia involves using anesthetic medication usually given by injection so that the part of your body that needs surgery is made numb. You may stay somewhat conscious during surgery but you are kept comfortable and free from pain. Your anesthesiologist may give you medicine(s) to help you relax or even sleep (sedation) during surgery.

Regional anesthesia is a similar type of anesthetic but generally is used for more major types of surgery. Anesthetic (freezing) medications are used to numb a larger or deeper part of your body. Types of regional anesthesia include spinal, epidural and nerve blocks. You will be sedated to a level that will make you comfortable; you may not remember or hear anything but will not be completely unconscious.

- **Spinal anesthesia:** The anesthetic is administered by a small needle placed near your spine to deliver medication, then removed. The drug takes effect quickly and blocks movement, pain and sensation in the lower body. It is frequently used for many operations below the navel/waist, such as rectal, bladder, prostate, uterus surgery and operations on the hips and legs.
- **Epidural anesthesia:** may be used for many of the same procedures for which spinal anesthesia is used. It is the same procedure that has been offered to women in labour for many years and is often used to manage pain during and after major operations. A small needle is placed in your back to deliver medication, then removed. In many cases a thin tube or catheter, is placed and taped to your back and connected to an infusion pump which delivers a specific amount of medicine to treat pain for several days after surgery. The dose can be adjusted so that the nerves that transmit pain are blocked, but you will keep some ability to move. The Acute Post-Operative Pain Service may adjust this amount to keep your pain at an acceptable level. You will be assessed by your nurse to help manage your pain.
- **Other Nerve blocks:** are given with a special needle that allows your anesthesiologist to isolate specific nerve(s) and then bathe that nerve with numbing medication to prevent pain and sometimes movement. This involves using local “freezing” anesthetic so that the part of your body where surgery is being done is made temporarily numb (similar to the dentist freezing your mouth). In some cases, as with epidurals, a thin tube or catheter may be placed at the injection site and be connected to a continuous medication drip for a period of time after surgery. Nerve blocks are typically used when surgery is performed on a hand, foot, leg or arm.

General anesthesia involves a state of controlled unconsciousness similar to being asleep and completely unaware.. It is the best choice of anesthesia for some operations. The anesthetic may be given as an intravenous (IV) medicine, or a gas which is inhaled through a breathing mask or tube, or a combination of both. When you have a general anesthetic you can't always take nice big breaths. In this case, a breathing tube will be put through your mouth or nose to help you breathe. The tube is removed as you wake up. Sometimes you may get a combined general anesthetic and nerve block. This is often done to provide optimal pain relief following surgery after you have recovered from the general anesthesia.

While you may not be completely unconscious for all types of surgery, you will be kept very comfortable and may not recall much of your experience.

Common Side Effects of Anesthesia

Depending on the type of anesthesia you receive, you may experience a sore throat, nausea or vomiting, headache, drowsiness, and/or fatigue after your procedure. Some patients do not experience any side effects. Talk to your anesthesiologist about what to expect.

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