Patient Information Leaflet

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR GENERAL ANAESTHETIC

Becoming confused after an operation

Department of Anaesthetics

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Some people become confused after an operation and anaesthetic. Their memory may fail; and their behaviour is quite unlike their normal selves. This can be very upsetting and can happen to any age group. However, the confusion usually gets better as you recover.

How does Confusion present itself?

Some people become agitated and confused in their thinking while others become quiet and withdrawn. Typical examples include:

- Not knowing your name or where you are
- Not knowing what has happened to you or why you are in hospital
- Loss of memory- you may be unable to recognise family members
- Reversal of day and night sleep pattern
- Being illogical, incoherent, shouting and swearing.
- Emotional changes such as anxiety, tearfulness, anger and aggression
- Trying to climb out of bed and appearing indifferent to whatever is going on.
- Becoming paranoid and thinking that people are trying to harm you
- Occasionally, people may experience visual or auditory hallucinations.

Why does this happen?

In the first few days and weeks after your operation, your body is repairing itself and the physical challenges associated with this process may cause you to be confused. However, there are some treatable causes, for example:

- Infections
- Poor pain control or side effects of pain relief medicines
- Dehydration and inadequate nutrition
- Low oxygen levels due to after effects of the anaesthetic, effects of medicines on breathing or other lung problems
- Loss of vision and hearing, simply due to lack of glasses or hearing aids.
- Others like sleep disturbance, constipation and missing out on regular medications.
How likely am I to get confused?

The following factors increase your chances of becoming confused:

- Advanced age
- Previous ill health
- Previous poor memory, dementia, stroke and other brain disorders like Parkinson’s disease
- Previous high alcohol intake and
- Previous poor mobility

Does the type of anaesthetic make a difference?

Yes, you can reduce the risk of confusion by opting for local or regional anaesthetic and staying awake for your operation. Your anaesthetist can tell you more about this option.

How is it treated?

The good news is that the vast majority of people with confusion make a full recovery. If there are any physical reasons, they will be treated (e.g. antibiotics, oxygen, pain relievers, fluids etc.) Besides these, the simplest measures can be most helpful:

- Frequent reassurance and reorientation are important for recovery. The involvement of family, friends and even pets can help to reassure you that you are safe.
- Use of familiar objects such as your own pillows and clothes helps
- Use of clocks and calendars are helpful to keep track of time
- Making sure that glasses and hearing aids are available immediately after surgery.
- Use of an interpreter for non-English speakers
- A return to normal sleep pattern and normal eating and drinking should be encouraged.

Despite these measures, some people may need sedatives (calming medicines) if they are at risk of harming themselves or others due to confusion.

How long does it take to recover?

Most people recover within days, some take up to 3 months and occasionally some may not recover at all. This may be because Post-operative Cognitive Dysfunction (POCD) has developed.
What is POCD?

In addition to feeling generally confused, some people, especially those over 60, find that their higher mental functions are not quite as good as they were before the operation and anaesthetic. e.g. can’t do the crossword or complex calculations as easily. These changes are called POCD and can be noted at one week (early) or 3 months or more after an operation (late). The cause of POCD is not understood as yet.

POCD is detected in clinical trials by memory tests, mood assessments and tests of ability to manage activities of daily living. Experts disagree on the validity of these tests and on how the results should be analysed. If you think you may have POCD it is important that you visit your GP and talk about it.

Who can help me afterwards if I suffer from confusion?

There is a team of Doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and social workers who will work with you to help you after your operation and will ensure your return home safely. However, friends and family also play a key role in your recovery.

This leaflet can be made available in alternative languages/forms on request.

For further advice please telephone

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