

Patient Information Leaflet

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR GENERAL ANAESTHETIC

Death or Brain damage

Department of Anaesthetics

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Why do deaths occur during general anaesthesia?

There are 5 main reasons for deaths while under a general anaesthetic.

- Your health - Being very unwell before surgery, having multiple medical problems and increasing age all contribute to increased risk.
- Nature of surgery- Surgery on your heart, lungs, bowels or major blood vessels and emergency surgery including surgery for major trauma increase your chances of having an unfavourable outcome. The surgeon may find that the surgery is very difficult to achieve without damage or he/she may make an error during the operation. You will be explained all major risks prior to your surgery so you can make an informed decision on whether to proceed with the surgery.
- The anaesthetist may make a misjudgement or an error, perhaps by giving too much of a drug or giving the wrong drug. However, it is rare at 1 in every 185,000 general anaesthetics administered.
- There may be an unexpected allergic reaction to an anaesthetic drug. Life-threatening allergic reactions occur in less than 1 in 10,000 general anaesthetics, and many are followed by a full recovery.

What is the risk of dying during a general anaesthetic?

Exact figures are not available, but if you are healthy and having a non-emergency surgery, the risk of dying is 1 in 100,000 general anaesthetics.

For every 100,000 Caesarean sections, one death happens due to the anaesthetic alone. The death rate is higher when having an emergency Caesarean under a general anaesthetic than a planned Caesarean under a spinal/ epidural.

The risk of a healthy child dying from a general anaesthetic is around 1 in 100,000

What is the risk of getting brain damage due to a general anaesthetic?

Dizziness, drowsiness, headache and confusion are relatively common after a general anaesthetics and do not signify brain damage. As it is very rare in healthy patients, exact figures for the risk of severe brain damage do not exist. Brain damage can lead to inability to move, think or feel. However, the risk of having a stroke that causes brain damage during a general anaesthetic is higher in elderly, people with previous strokes and those having surgery to the brain, head, neck and the heart. Most strokes occurring around time of surgery and are not directly related to the general anaesthetic. However most strokes occur 2-10 days after surgery and are due to the combined effects of surgery, anaesthetic and the general health of the patient.

What precautions are used to prevent death and brain damage from occurring?

Besides causing unconsciousness, anaesthetic drugs affect all organs of the body. It is usually these other effects that increase the risk of death or brain damage during the anaesthetic. Anaesthetists are trained in the appropriate use of these drugs and techniques to suit your health conditions. He/she stays beside you throughout the whole anaesthetic and aided by some monitoring devices, can adjust the anaesthetic to keep you safe and healthy.

Is there anything I can do to prevent the risk of dying or brain damage?

If you require emergency surgery, the short answer is, "not much." However if you are having planned surgery, then anything that improves your physical condition will reduce the risks associated with anaesthesia. Your GP, anaesthetist and surgeon can advise and help with your specific medical conditions.

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

For further advice please telephone

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Creation date- July 2014

Review date- July 2017

Produced by- Department of Anaesthetics