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Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Anesthesia (The Basics)

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What is anesthesia?

"Anesthesia" is a medical term for different types of medicine that people get before and during surgery or another procedure. These medicines are given to make sure that you do not feel pain during the procedure. In some cases, like when you are "put to sleep" for surgery, the anesthesia medicines also prevent you from remembering it afterward.

Anesthesia medicines are given by a doctor called an "anesthesiologist." Sometimes, a "nurse anesthetist" is also involved. This is a nurse with special training in anesthesia.

What are the different types of anesthesia?

There are 3 main types of anesthesia:

- **Local** – This type of anesthesia uses medicine to numb a small part of your body so that you don't feel pain. It can be given as a cream, gel, or spray on the skin. It can also be given by an injection (shot) into the skin. Surgeons might give local anesthesia before minor surgery such as a skin or breast biopsy. (A biopsy involves taking a sample of tissue.)

You might be awake when you get local anesthesia. Or you might get medicines to make you relax and feel sleepy, called "sedatives." These are given through a thin tube that goes into a vein, called an "IV."

- **Regional** – This type of anesthesia blocks pain in specific areas of your body. You might be awake during regional anesthesia, or you might get sedatives.

One type of regional anesthesia blocks pain in an area of the body such as an arm or leg.

Another type of regional anesthesia is called a "spinal block." This typically blocks pain in the lower half of your body. The anesthesiologist puts a small needle in your lower back, and injects medicine to numb the nerves in your spine. It can be used for surgery done on your legs or inside your belly. A similar type of regional anesthesia is called an "epidural." For an epidural, the anesthesiologist uses a needle to put a catheter (small tube) into your lower back, near the nerves in your spine. For example, some people get an epidural during childbirth. Other people get one for a surgical procedure or to control pain after surgery.

- **General** – This type of anesthesia makes you unconscious so you can't feel, see, or hear anything during surgery. Some of the medicines are given through an IV. Others are gases that you breathe. During general anesthesia, you might also get a breathing tube to help you breathe. If so, the anesthesiologist will carefully place the tube in your throat while you are asleep during general anesthesia, and remove it before you wake up.

For some procedures, more than 1 type of anesthesia can be used. This can help give better pain control.

What happens before anesthesia?

An anesthesiologist will meet with you before your surgery and do an exam. They will also ask you many questions, including:

- Do you have any health problems?
- Do you have any dental problems, such as loose teeth or false teeth?
- What medicines do you take, including over-the-counter medicines and supplements?
- Do you smoke, drink alcohol, or use any illegal drugs?
- Do you have any allergies to foods or medicines?
- Have you or any of your relatives ever had a problem with anesthesia medicines?

The type of anesthesia you get depends on:

- Your answers to the questions above
- The type of surgery or procedure that you are having

In some cases, you might get to choose between different types of anesthesia. In all cases, your anesthesiologist will explain how your anesthesia will be given and answer any questions that you have.

You will get instructions for how to prepare the day of your procedure. This includes information about:

- Eating and drinking – For some types of anesthesia, you need to "fast" before surgery. This means not eating or drinking anything for a period of time. In other cases, you might be allowed to have liquids until a short time before the procedure.
- What help you will need – For example, you might need to have someone else bring you home.

What happens during anesthesia?

During the procedure, the anesthesiologist will continually check your breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate. If you have general anesthesia, your anesthesiologist also makes sure that you stay unconscious.

Some people worry that they might wake up during general anesthesia. But this is very rare. Your anesthesiologist constantly adjusts the medicines to keep you from waking up.

Are there any side effects from anesthesia?

After anesthesia, the medical staff will monitor you as the medicine wears off. Each type of anesthesia has possible side effects.

If you have a **spinal block or epidural**, the numbness will last for a few hours after your procedure before wearing off. Other side effects can include:

- Headache – There is a small chance of getting a type of headache that can last for several days. This is sometimes called a "spinal headache." It usually goes away on its own, but pain-relieving medicines and other treatments can help.
- Trouble urinating – Some patients have trouble emptying their bladders for a few hours after surgery until the medicine wears off.

If you have **general anesthesia**, you will likely feel a little groggy or confused for a short time after waking up. Other side effects can include:

- Feeling sick to your stomach (nausea) and throwing up (vomiting) – If this happens, your anesthesiologist can give you medicines to help.

- A sore throat – This can happen if you had a breathing tube. It usually gets better quickly.

The staff will make sure that you are feeling better before you go home.

What else should I know about anesthesia?

Keeping you safe is your anesthesiologist's main concern. Before surgery, you should ask your anesthesiologist any questions about the risks and benefits of anesthesia, and the type of anesthesia that is best for you. After surgery, your anesthesiologist will check on you as you recover, and you can tell them how you are feeling.

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