

Preparing for surgery

# Fitter Better Sooner



Advice from the Royal College of Anaesthetists  
Endorsed by

## Your role

Having surgery is a big moment in your life and it's normal to feel anxious about it.

Fitter patients who are able to improve their health and activity levels recover from surgery more quickly. **What you do now can have a really big impact on your recovery.**

Taking an active role in planning and preparing for your operation will help you feel in control, leave hospital sooner and get back to normal more quickly.

This leaflet will give you general advice on what you can do to get the best outcome from your surgery.

## The healthcare team

Many healthcare professionals from different medical specialties will work together to make your surgery and recovery go smoothly. They will look after you before, during and after your surgery. This is often referred to as the **perioperative team**. But it all starts with **you**.

The perioperative team might consist of:



# Preparing your body

## Lifestyle changes

There are many changes you can make to reduce the risks of surgery. Even small changes can make a big difference.

### Exercise

Your heart and lungs have to work harder after an operation to help the body to heal. If you are already active, they will be used to this. While you are waiting for your operation, try and increase your activity levels.

Brisk walking, swimming, cycling, gardening or playing with your children are all helpful. Try to do any activity which makes you feel out of breath at least three times per week, but always check with your doctor first what type of exercise is most appropriate for you. Activities that improve your strength and balance will also be useful for your recovery.

### Who can help me?

- Your GP surgery may be able to refer you to an exercise scheme at your local gym. Some people find a personal trainer helpful.
- Depending on where you live you may have access to NHS 'healthtrainers' who can help motivate you and offer advice. There are also a number of mobile apps to help you set goals and track your progress, such as 'Active 10 walking tracker' and 'Couch to 5K'.
- Try joining a free council or community walking group or environmental volunteering scheme in your local area such as 'Walks on Prescription'. As well as giving you encouragement and support to start walking and exercising, they are enjoyable and will boost your mood. Ask your GP surgery what is available in your area.
- If you have back or joint pain you will often see a physiotherapist before seeing a consultant. You may be more limited than others, but ask your physiotherapist for exercises that you can do.

These are only some ideas and there will be many health and fitness programmes that you can explore in your local area.

### Diet

Your body needs to repair itself after surgery – eating a healthy diet before and after your surgery can really help.



## Who can help me?

Your GP surgery should be able to give you some advice and information on healthy eating. NHS Choices can offer useful help: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well)

## Weight

If you are overweight, losing weight can help reduce the stress on your heart and lungs. In addition it can help to:

- lower your blood pressure
- improve your blood sugar level
- reduce pain in your joints
- reduce your risk of blood clots after surgery
- reduce your risk of wound infections after surgery
- allow you to exercise more easily.

## Who can help me?

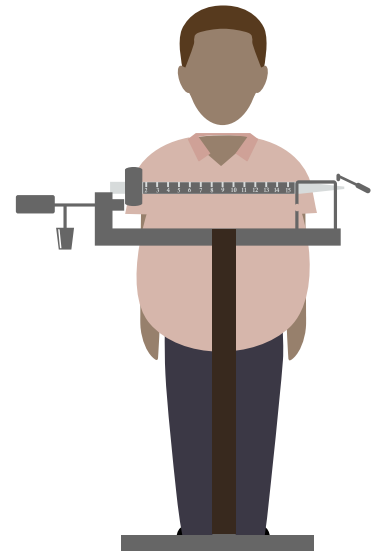
Your GP surgery will be able to weigh you and signpost you to advice on healthy eating, any local weight loss schemes and exercise opportunities in your area. Some councils also have schemes that can support you so it is also worth looking at your local council website or contacting them.

You may find it helpful to join a weight loss class. In some areas NHS healthtrainers may be available to help you.

It has been shown that people who improve their lifestyle in the run up to surgery are much more likely to keep up these changes after surgery. This can have a really positive impact on their health in the long term.

## Alcohol

Alcohol can have many effects on the body, but importantly it can reduce the liver's ability to produce the building blocks necessary for healing. Make sure you are drinking within the recommended limits, or lower, to improve your body's ability to heal after surgery.



There are many changes you can make to reduce the risks of surgery. Even small changes can make a big difference.



## Who can help me?

You can find useful information on how to reduce alcohol and the benefits to you on NHS Choices: [www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/tips-on-cutting-down-alcohol](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/tips-on-cutting-down-alcohol)  
Also see the drinkaware website: [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

## Smoking

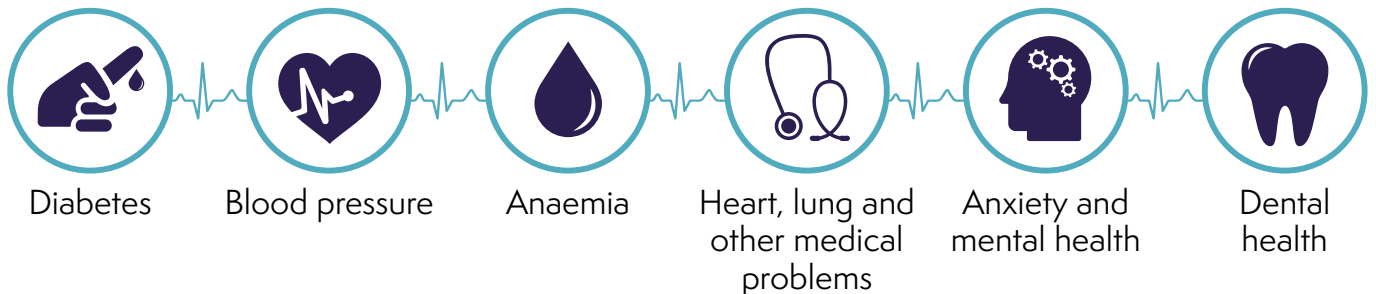
Stopping smoking is hard, but the good news is that quitting or cutting down shortly before surgery can reduce length of stay in hospital, improve wound healing and lung function. Preparing for surgery offers a real opportunity to commit to stopping smoking.

## Who can help me?

- Your GP practice will be able to offer help in reducing or stopping smoking, so ask them about the best options for you.
- There may be charities or support groups in your local area.
- **Action on Smoking and Health (ASH)** is a public health charity that works to reduce the harm caused by smoking. They have helpful advice on quitting ([bit.ly/2N7FLgG](http://bit.ly/2N7FLgG)).



## Medical conditions



Many medical conditions can affect recovery from surgery. It is important to make sure any known conditions are controlled as well as possible ahead of your surgery.

You can also book in for a general health check at your GP surgery if you are between 40 and 74 years old.

## Diabetes

Good control of your blood sugar is really important to reduce your risk of infections after surgery. Think about your diet and weight. Talk to your diabetes nurse or team early to see if they need to make any changes to your treatment.

## Blood pressure

Blood pressure should be controlled to safe levels to reduce your risk of stroke. Sometimes operations may be delayed if it is too high.

Have your blood pressure checked at your surgery well ahead of your operation – some GP surgeries have automated machines so you can pop in any time. If it is high, your GP can check your medications and make any changes needed ahead of the operation.

### Anaemia (low blood count)

If you have been bleeding or have a chronic medical condition, a blood test can check whether you are anaemic. If you are, you should talk to your GP about treatment to improve your blood count before surgery.

Treating your anaemia before surgery reduces the chance of you needing a blood transfusion. It will also help your recovery and make you feel less tired after your surgery.

### Heart, lung and other medical problems

If you have any other long-term medical problems, consider asking your GP or nurse for a review of your medications, especially if you think your health is not as good as it could be.

### Anxiety and mental health

Most people feel some anxiety about having surgery. If the thought of going into hospital is making you very anxious or upset, it may be helpful to talk about your concerns with your GP. In some areas GPs can refer you for specific support.

Many techniques including mindfulness, relaxation and breathing exercises or yoga could help you relax before and after your surgery.

If you are taking medication for mental health problems it is important to let the nurse at the hospital know about your medication. They will usually not want you to stop this. They can help organise any particular support you need for your time in hospital or return home.

### Dental health

If you have loose teeth or crowns, a visit to the dentist may reduce the risk of damage to your teeth during an operation.



It is important to make sure any known conditions are controlled as well as possible ahead of your surgery.

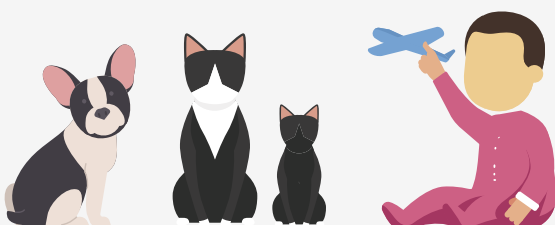


## Practical preparation for your operation

We know that coming into hospital for surgery can be a worrying time. Talk to your family and friends about going into hospital and tell them how they can help you. Don't underestimate how tired you may be afterwards.

Give the below checklist some thought well in advance of the operation.

- ✓ **How will I pass the time?** – have some headphones and music, books, tablet computer or puzzles. Don't forget chargers.
- ✓ **What can I do to relax?** – learn some breathing techniques, try yoga or listen to relaxing music. Read about mindfulness.
- ✓ **What do I need to prepare at home?** – you may find it difficult to move around when you return from hospital – consider sleeping on the ground floor and getting mobility aids.
- ✓ **Who can look after my elderly relatives?** – if friends and family cannot help, contact your local council and your local carer service ([www.carers.org](http://www.carers.org)).
- ✓ **How will I get to and from the hospital?** – can someone drive you? If you are eligible for hospital transport, the hospital may be able to organise transport for you.
- ✓ **Do I have enough easy-to-cook meals and healthy snacks for when I get home?** – think who might be able to help prepare meals or help with your shopping afterwards.
- ✓ **Who can look after my children or pets?** – don't underestimate how tired you might feel after the operation. Ask friends and family to help or to be on standby. To help you with childcare, they may need to arrange time off work too. If you have significant difficulties looking after your children following an operation, talk to your local council or your health visitor.



- ✓ **Do I have enough medication and batteries for my hearing aid to last me in hospital and when I get home?** – remember to take your usual medication into hospital with you.
- ✓ **Do I have some over-the-counter painkillers at home?** – you may need to take some during your recovery as instructed by the hospital.
- ✓ **What do I need to pack?** – if you are staying in hospital overnight you should think about toiletries, nightwear and comfortable clothes and footwear. It is important to get out of bed, get dressed and start to move as soon as your operation allows – those who do this get home sooner and recover quicker. Temperatures in hospital can vary so some layers of clothing can be useful. See NHS Choices for further information:  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/having-surgery/preparation](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/having-surgery/preparation)
- ✓ **What else would be helpful to do?** – get your house and garden in order. Get up to date with your general affairs and finances. This will mean you do not have to worry about these whilst you recover.
- ✓ **Whom should I let know I am going into hospital?** – friends and family can usually give you practical support. It is also good to have people to talk with whilst you are at home recovering. Many people will want to help your recovery, so let them know how they can help in plenty of time.
- ✓ **Make sure I have a shower/bath before going to hospital to minimise the risk of infection.**





## Practical questions to ask your perioperative team about your surgery

Members of the perioperative team at the hospital will discuss your anaesthetic, surgery and recovery period. They will discuss any particular risks you have from both your anaesthetic and surgery and any choices you have. They will give you information to read at home. There will be a contact number to ring if you need to ask more questions.

The better prepared you are, the easier the process is likely to be.

Below are some questions that you might want to ask the perioperative team.

- What time do I need to stop eating and drinking before surgery?
- What medication should I take on the day of my surgery?
- What do I need to pack for the hospital?
- Do I need to remove nail varnish, gels or piercings?
- Can I have visitors? When are the visiting times?
- Will someone at the hospital shave me if needed before my surgery?
- When can I expect to go home?
- What help can I expect to need at home afterwards?
- How long will it be before I can shower/bathe again?
- Are there any important 'dos' and don'ts' for my recovery?
- Will I have stitches or staples that need to be taken out?
- How much time will I need to arrange off work?
- Who will give me a fit/sick note for my employer?
- Will I have a check up afterwards?
- How long might it be before I can walk/swim/play golf/run again?
- When can I drive afterwards?
- How long will it be before my life is roughly back to normal?



“What time do I need to stop eating and drinking before surgery?”

## What can I expect during my recovery?

Before you go home your nurse will give you written information about what to expect during your recovery and how to manage any pain you might experience. This will also include anything to look out for and a number to call if you are worried.

Our factsheets on some of the most common surgical operations ([www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/factsheets](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/factsheets)) give more detailed information on how to prepare for different types of surgery and what to expect afterwards.



## Practical help to keep you motivated during your recovery

Depending on what surgery you are having, recovery may take many weeks. Don't worry if some days go better than others, as this is normal. It can be useful to keep a recovery diary which you can continue after you go home. Try and get into a routine and get up in the morning at a regular time. A list of daily goals can give structure to your day and help monitor your progress.

Visits and phone calls from family and friends can cheer you up and encourage you to reach your goals. Be careful though that you don't tire yourself out from too many visitors.





## Additional resources available online

### Royal College of Anaesthetists

- Preparing for surgery: Fitter Better Sooner toolkit and animation ([www.rcoa.ac.uk/fitterbettersooner](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/fitterbettersooner))
- Caring for someone who has had a general anaesthetic or sedation ([www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/sedation](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/sedation))
- Risks associated with your anaesthetic ([www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risks](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risks))
- Patient information series ([www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/leaflets-video-resources](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/leaflets-video-resources))
- Information for children, carers and parents ([www.rcoa.ac.uk/childrensinfo](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk/childrensinfo))

### NHS Getting Better Sooner

My role and my responsibilities in helping to improve my recovery ([bit.ly/2NbJidW](https://bit.ly/2NbJidW)).

### Royal College of Surgeons of England

Recovering from surgery ([www.rcseng.ac.uk/patient-care/recovering-from-surgery](http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/patient-care/recovering-from-surgery)).

## What does the term 'enhanced recovery' mean?

Enhanced recovery is the name given to a programme that aims to get you back to your normal health as quickly as possible after a major operation. Hospital staff look at all the evidence of what you and they can do before, during and after your surgery to help give you the best chances for a quick and full recovery. This should get you home sooner.

The programmes will vary depending on what operation you are having and which hospital you are being treated at, but may include:

- improving your fitness levels before your operation if there is enough time
- treating any other long-term medical conditions
- reducing the time you are starved for by giving you water and carbohydrate drinks before your surgery
- giving you drugs to prevent sickness after surgery
- considering the best ways of giving pain relief during the operation
- using local anaesthetic blocks or regional anaesthetics where possible
- giving you the best pain relief afterwards to get you moving quicker
- allowing you to start drinking earlier
- reducing the time you have catheters and drips
- teaching you exercises to help you recover after your operation.

By following an enhanced recovery programme, there are usually fewer complications after surgery. There is also less chance of you needing to go back into hospital again.



## Tell us what you think

We welcome suggestions to improve this leaflet. If you have any comments that you would like to make, please email them to [patientinformation@rcoa.ac.uk](mailto:patientinformation@rcoa.ac.uk)

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This leaflet has been reviewed by the RCoA Patient Information Group (which includes lay members) and by the RCoA Professional Standards Advisory Group.

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### First Edition 2018

This leaflet will be reviewed within five years of the date of publication.

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