



Centre for Perioperative Care



FAQs for patients having an operation during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic

Introduction

The NHS has announced that they will restart some surgical services after they had been stopped to help hospitals cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This means that some hospitals will start contacting patients on the waiting lists, especially urgent cases, about their delayed operations to arrange a date for the surgery.

This series of FAQs aims to address some of the concerns that you may have about going to hospital during the pandemic and to offer some advice on how you can best prepare for your operation.

What are hospitals doing to protect surgical patients during the COVID-19 pandemic?

NHS staff throughout the UK have been working hard to plan and prepare for how their hospitals can safely restart surgery during the pandemic.

How this will be done will vary from hospital to hospital. All providers will plan their services so that the care of patients requiring surgery under anaesthetic is as safe as possible at this time.

Your hospital will be doing everything possible to ensure that the risk of you getting an infection is as low as possible, for example by:

- ensuring that staff are well trained in how to limit the spread of infection in hospitals
- arranging for all patients coming to hospital to be tested for coronavirus, and for those who have tested positive to be cared for in separate areas
- carrying out regular deep cleaning of wards, operating theatres and equipment
- ensuring that staff use necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) where there is a significant risk of infection and that there are adequate stocks of PPE
- ensuring that the right levels of staffing and equipment are in place so that surgery can take place safely
- ensuring that as many NHS staff as possible are tested for COVID-19.



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Local NHS hospitals will also use different strategies to treat patients with COVID-19 separately. This may include treating COVID-19 patients at the temporary Nightingale hospitals (where available), setting up COVID protected cancer hubs or using private hospitals to minimise the risk of infection.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to completely remove the risk of contracting coronavirus while in hospital. It is also not possible to give patients an estimate of how likely they are to contract it – that information is just not available at the moment.

I am worried about going to hospital during the pandemic. What should I do if I am offered an operation?

If your surgery is urgent (for example for a cancer that may get worse if there is a delay in treatment), it is likely that going ahead with your surgery will be the most beneficial option for you. However, you may wish to talk to those involved in your care (your GP, surgeon or oncologist) who can help you to consider your options. You may also want to discuss your choices with your family.

If your surgery is less urgent you may wish to talk to those involved in your care about whether it is the right option for you at that moment. Some conditions, like joint and back pain, can be improved with exercises and physiotherapy to the point that surgery can be avoided.

You may consider asking your doctors the following questions before any test, treatment or procedure, to help you make an informed decision:

1. What are the **Benefits?**
2. What are the **Risks?**
3. What are the **Alternatives?**
4. What if I do **Nothing?**

BRAN is a discussion tool used in shared decision making. You can find out more about **BRAN** and shared decision making [here](#).



What will be different when having an operation during the COVID-19 pandemic?

To maintain social distancing and reduce travelling to hospitals, you may be offered online consultations with the surgeon and the preoperative assessment clinic, rather than be asked to attend appointments in person.

You will be asked to self-isolate at home for 14 days before the operation, along with members of your household if you do not live alone. It is very important that you take this request seriously for your own health, for the health of the NHS staff caring for you and for the health of other patients.

All other patients coming into hospital for a planned procedure will have been asked to self-isolate to reduce the risk of contracting the virus for everyone.

The hospital will ask you to take a swab test for COVID-19 before admission. If you require a long hospital stay you will also be tested regularly while you are admitted.

When you are in hospital, most staff will be wearing some protective equipment – this may be a surgical mask and plastic apron or may be 'full' PPE depending on the area. Full PPE can look alarming as much of the person's face is covered by a mask and a visor or goggles. Please do not be intimidated by it and continue to speak to staff and ask questions as you normally would.

If you have hearing difficulties and particularly if you rely on lip reading, please make staff aware of this so that they can make changes to how they communicate with you. In some hospitals the staff may use flashcards to communicate with patients.

Should I tell the hospital, before I come in for my procedure, if I have had contact with a person with coronavirus?

Yes. It is important to contact the hospital so that further details can be taken. A decision can then be made based on the urgency of your planned procedure. Even though this may cause a delay in your surgery, in most cases it will be much safer to rule out coronavirus, than to go ahead when you may have it.

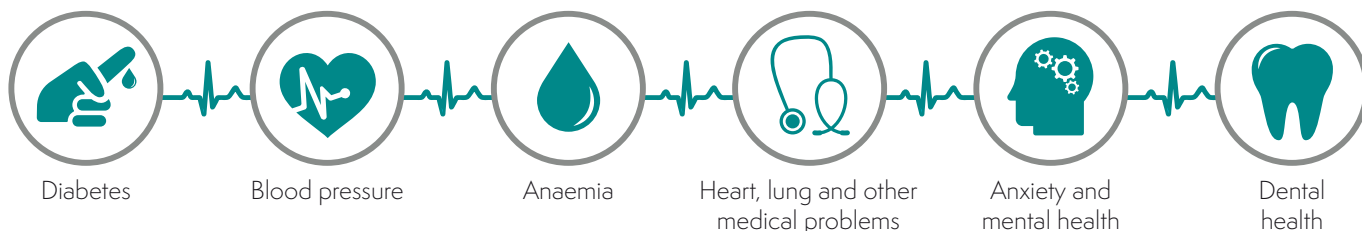
Will my surgery go ahead if I have coronavirus?

If you have, or are thought to have coronavirus, your operation will only take place if it is a very urgent or emergency procedure and you consent to it, after discussing the risks with the healthcare team. Some types of surgery, for example cardiac, carry considerable additional risks for patients with coronavirus.

I have an underlying medical condition. Should I tell the hospital staff?

If you have any underlying medical conditions, you should tell the surgeon or anaesthetist, for example at the preoperative assessment clinic, so that they can take this into account in planning your care and assessing your risk.

It is important that you control any medical conditions and take your medications regularly.



Can I have visitors if I'm in hospital for a procedure during the pandemic?

Many hospitals are now discouraging or limiting visitors to patients in hospital in order to reduce the risk of spreading coronavirus. You should follow the local advice and guidance.

Whether you can receive visitors or not will depend on your circumstances and that of your hospital at the time. Very often, if visitors are allowed, they will be asked to wear extra protection.

Many hospitals are now using video and phone apps to allow patients to stay in touch with their families and loved ones, if they cannot have visitors.

Where will I recover after my operation and how long will it be before I can go home?

This will depend largely on the type of procedure you have, any known medical problems and the surgical care plan that the staff have agreed with you. Some patients can recover on a normal ward, while some may need a stay in the Intensive Care Unit or the High Dependency Unit.

If you have been tested positive for coronavirus you will be cared for in a separate area of the hospital.

For some procedures, and if all goes to plan, you will be able to leave hospital on the same day of the operation.

When I am back home, will I still get additional support from my GP or community nursing?

You will not be discharged from hospital until you are well enough to leave. This would normally be to your own home or usual place of residence (for example a care home). Occasionally you may be offered further time to recuperate at another care facility prior to going home.

Before leaving hospital you may be asked to repeat the swab test to check whether you have coronavirus, even if you have no symptoms.

You should always follow all the instructions given to you on your discharge letter.

Communication between the hospital and the community is continuing as usual during the pandemic. Your GP should be aware of any ongoing issues that you may need help with and any additional nursing you require will be organised prior to you leaving hospital. However, it is important that you discuss any concerns at an early stage to allow early treatment if needed. Booking in any planned appointments early, like wound cleaning and dressing, can help surgeries plan their workload during the pandemic.

You may be able to get help with practical issues such as shopping or arranging for someone to check in on you or call you on the phone, if you are isolated. This can be arranged through your Local Authority's Covid support service networks or your GP surgery may have a 'social prescribing link worker'.

Because of coronavirus, surgeries are seeing fewer patients face to face, but you can still speak with GPs online or over the phone. Home visits may be arranged if needed. Many practice nurses are working in the community during the pandemic, so more are available for home visits. Anyone visiting you in your home will wear appropriate PPE.



What can I do to prepare for my operation and minimise risk?

If your procedure is not an emergency, you may find that you need to wait a while until the day of your operation. However, you can use this to your advantage.

There is much you can do during the waiting time to prepare yourself for surgery and improve your health. Evidence shows that fitter patients recover quicker from surgery and experience fewer complications.

What we understand about the virus also shows that those people in better health usually develop milder symptoms and recover quicker from COVID-19.

If you are as fit as possible ahead of the procedure, the healthcare team may allow your surgery to be treated as a 'day case'. This means that you will be able to leave the hospital the same day of the operation and minimise risk even further. Please note that some operations always require you to remain overnight in hospital after the surgery.

Below are some steps you can take to improve your physical and mental health ahead of the operation and to increase your ability to fight coronavirus.



stop smoking: even stopping smoking a few days ahead of surgery will increase the amount of oxygen in your blood, making you more resilient to the stresses of surgery and COVID-19 should you contract it.



exercise regularly, and daily if possible: ideally brisk walking, cycling, electric-bike or jogging. If indoors, try moving in a different way, e.g. dancing, yoga or using a video/tv programme. Any increase in physical activity that makes you feel slightly out of breath will improve your fitness.



do strengthening and balance exercises: walk up and down the stairs, do squats and practice sit-to-stands to strengthen your muscles. The quicker you can move around after surgery the quicker you will be allowed to leave hospital.



nutrition: people with obesity do worse with both surgery and coronavirus. If you have obesity or are overweight, try to lose some weight. Eating a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables will also maintain a healthy immune system.



mental health: try to sleep well, and look after your mental wellbeing. Learn some breathing techniques, try yoga or listen to relaxing music. Read about mindfulness.



alcohol: Try to stick to the guidance on daily alcohol units and have alcohol-free days.



controlling existing conditions: if you have diabetes, high blood pressure and/or anaemia (low blood count), it is important to try and get these as well controlled as possible before your operation. You may want to discuss your medical conditions with your GP to make sure that you're on the right medications.

Remember, small changes can make a big difference in a short time!

You can find out more about how to prepare for an operation with the [Fitter Better Sooner](#) patient information toolkit.

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