



# Centre for Perioperative Care



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

Updated March 2022

### Introduction

The NHS is working to restore surgical services after they were stopped to help hospitals cope with the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This series of FAQs aims to address some of the concerns that you may have about going to hospital at this time 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 worked hard to plan how their hospitals can most safely offer surgery while the pandemic continues. The approaches may vary at different hospitals, but all staff will be doing everything possible to ensure that the risk of you getting an infection is as low as possible, for example by:

- testing patients coming to hospital for coronavirus
- caring for those patients who are suspected to have, or who have tested positive for, coronavirus in separate areas
- ensuring that staff are well trained in how to limit the spread of infection in hospitals
- ensuring that staff have and use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)
- ensuring that the right levels of staffing and equipment are in place so that surgery can take place safely
- minimising visitors into the hospital when there are high rates of COVID-19 in the community

Local NHS hospitals will also use different strategies to support patients with COVID-19 separately. They may use different wards or parts of a hospital or using private hospitals to separate patients who have COVID-19 from those who do not, to minimise the risk of spreading infection.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to completely remove the risk of contracting coronavirus while in hospital.



## 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.

If you are in a group that is known to be at higher risk of developing the more severe forms of COVID-19 (eg older age, male, overweight, being from a black, Asian or other minority ethnic group or having underlying medical conditions), this will be considered and discussed with you as part of you and your team deciding whether surgery is the right option for you.

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 planning for 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 being asked to attend appointments in person.

Developing COVID-19 around the time of an operation is more dangerous than at other times. The risks of death or serious complications increase four times and remain increased for a full seven weeks after a COVID-19 infection. Therefore, you should minimise contact with others and follow strict social distancing and hand washing advice. You may also wish to self-isolate for a few days before the operation to reduce the risk of catching the virus even further. You should keep active even if you are self-isolating.



The hospital may ask you to take a swab test for COVID-19 a few days before admission and to self-isolate from this time. Your surgery may need to be postponed if you test positive for the virus, especially in the first 10 days of a positive test when you may be infectious to others. If you stay in hospital for several days you may need a repeat swab.

Before coming in, you will be asked about symptoms that might indicate COVID-19 infection such as cough or temperature.

When you are in hospital, staff will be wearing some protective equipment – this may be a surgical mask or may also include a plastic apron and gloves 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.

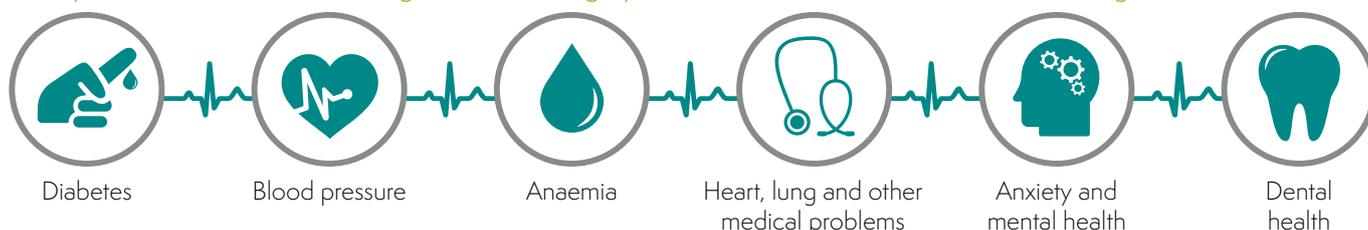
### Should I tell the hospital, before I come in for my procedure, if I have had contact with a person with coronavirus?

Yes. It is important to contact the hospital so that further details can be taken. A decision can then be made with you based on the urgency of your planned procedure and your underlying risks.

### Will my surgery go ahead if I have coronavirus?

Patients who have COVID-19 around the time of surgery are at higher risk of developing a severe form of the disease, of breathing difficulties and of death. For this reason, if you have symptoms of coronavirus, you must let your healthcare team know immediately. There will be a discussion about the balance of risks. Risks include baseline risks (such as whether the operation is major) and individual risks of bad outcome if you contract COVID-19. The risks will be balanced against the risks of delaying. If you are in a group that is known to be at higher risk of developing the more severe forms of COVID-19 (eg older age, male, overweight, being from a black, Asian or other minority ethnic group or having underlying medical conditions) this will be considered and discussed with you. There should be Shared Decision Making between you and your team deciding whether surgery is the right option for you and whether to delay if you have contracted COVID-19 in the 7 weeks before planned surgery.

[View patient information on timing of elective surgery soon after infection with the virus causing COVID-19](#)



### 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 (which may be online or on the telephone), 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, remain active and take your medications regularly.

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

If your procedure is not an emergency, you may find that you are on a waiting list. You should use this 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 from COVID-19 more quickly.

If you are as fit as possible ahead of the procedure, the healthcare team may allow your surgery to be undertaken as a 'day case'. This means that you will be able to leave the hospital the same day as the operation and minimise risks 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](#)

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

Hospitals are 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). If you are returning to a care setting (such as a care home) you may need a further swab test to ensure you do not have the virus before leaving.

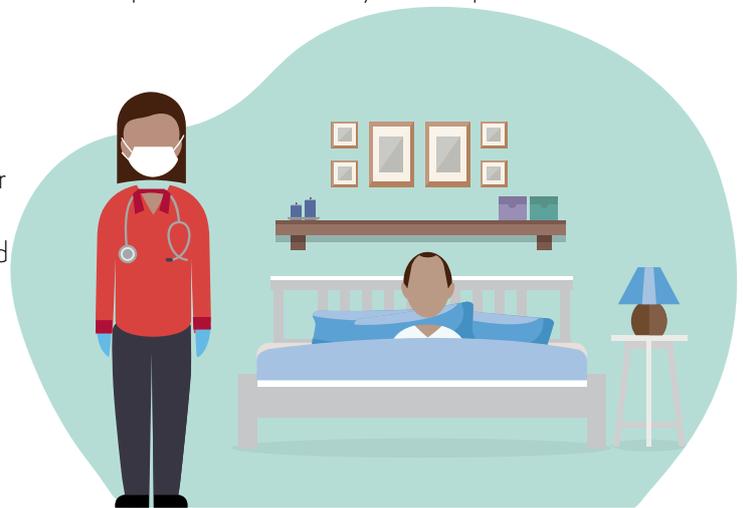
You should always follow all the instructions given to you on your discharge letter. Communication between the hospital and the community is continuing as usual during the pandemic. Your GP should be aware of any ongoing issues that you may need help with and any additional care you require should be 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 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 networks or your GP surgery may have a 'social prescribing link worker.'

GPs are offering some face to face appointments and some telephone or online appointments that save travelling. The GP will consider doctor or district nurse home visits if appropriate. Anyone visiting you in your home will wear appropriate PPE.

## What should I do if I develop symptoms within 3 weeks of my operation?

Your hospital should let you know what to do if you develop symptoms of coronavirus soon after your operation – please ask if you are not given this information before you leave.



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