

## SURGERY QUICK GUIDE

If you've been told you need surgery, it's important to do your research. If your surgery isn't an emergency, then you can take time to decide, along with your medical providers, if it's right for you. Follow these steps to help you get better, safer surgery.

### STEP 1: Ask Lots of Questions

Before you agree to any surgery or procedure, start by asking your provider or surgeon these questions:

#### Can We Use a Decision Aid?

Decision aids are tools that can help you, and your provider, compare the risks and benefits of treatment options, determine what matters most to you and make a **shared decision** about how to proceed.

Ask your provider if there are decision aids available for your condition.

#### What is Your Area of Expertise?

Many surgeons now 'ultra specialize' in their field of expertise.

For example, if you need surgery on your knee, don't just go to a general orthopedic surgeon. Find one who specializes in knees.

Ask your surgeon if he or she is particularly skilled at the surgery you need.

#### How Many of These Have You Done?

There is no magic number to determine how successful your surgeon will be, but you probably don't want to be the first patient he or she has performed the operation on.

Ask how many of these exact surgeries he or she does every month. Also ask if the surgery will be performed at medical center that does a 'high-volume' of the procedure you need.

#### What Outcomes Should I Expect?

Some surgeries are palliative (they help you feel better or lessen pain) and some are meant to be curative (make you free of disease).

Ask what outcome your provider is expecting for you.

#### What Would Happen If I Decide Not To Have This?

Surgery may not be your only option for treatment. Ask if there are other ways to manage your condition such as medications, physical therapy or just 'wait and see.'

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### Can This Surgery Be Done Using a Minimally-Invasive Technique?

Many operations can now be done using a minimally-invasive technique resulting in less pain, faster recovery and fewer chances of complications.

Ask your surgeon if this is an option. Some doctors opt not to use this technique even if it's possible. Do your research!

### Where Will This Be Done?

Keep in mind that if you have your operation in a free-standing surgery center, you would have to be transferred to a hospital if there is a serious complication or emergency.

If you have a complicated medical condition, such as cancer, you may need to have multiple specialists involved in your care. If you can, choose an academic medical center that specializes in treating your condition.

### What Will My Recovery Be Like?

Ask if you'll need time off from work and other activities.

Try to find others who have had the same operation. Ask them what recovery is *really* like. **Patientslikeme.com** is a great place to connect with other patients.

### What Are The Risks?

No surgery is without risks. It's up to you, and your healthcare team, to determine if the benefits outweigh these risks. This includes cost.

If you have chronic conditions, such as diabetes or heart disease, they may affect your outcomes and recovery. Ask your surgeon what you should do to prepare for surgery.

If you are a smoker, heavy drinker or use illicit drugs, it's very important to let your surgeon know. These factors can affect your risks, outcomes and they may change the way your body responds to anesthesia.

### How Much Will This Cost?

You'll want to know, upfront, how much you will be expected to pay out-of-pocket. Ask your surgeon and call your insurance company. Get estimates and quotes **in writing**.

### How Urgent Is This?

Unless it's an emergency, most surgeries can wait. If possible, take your time to weigh the risks and benefits and decide if it's the right option for you.

Be sure to get a few opinions on how quickly you need to have the surgery done. Don't be pressured into making a hasty decision if it's not urgent.

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### STEP 2: Get a Second Opinion

Always get a second opinion if you've been told you need surgery. A good surgeon will encourage this.

It's wise to get opinions from other surgeons who are not affiliated with each other or don't work in the same medical practice or hospital system.

If you get a second opinion and it differs from the first, consider getting a third (and even fourth) opinion. Especially if you've been told you need a major or complicated surgery.

### STEP 3: Research Surgeons

If you've decided to proceed with surgery, it's time to choose your surgeon. Here are a few things you should do before you make your final decision.

#### Consult With Others

Ask family, friends and your other medical providers if they have recommendations for you. Run the surgeons by them that you've consulted with or considered. See if they have opinions about your choices.

If you know someone who works in healthcare, ask for their insights and recommendations. Insider knowledge is very, very valuable.

#### Check Surgeons' Credentials

You can go to the **Federation of State Medical Boards** website to check a physician's education, certifications, licenses and any actions.

If a doctor does have actions listed, check with their state medical board for details. This information is usually available online.

#### Check Death & Complication Rates

ProPublica has a **Surgeon Scorecard Tool** where you can check death and complication rates for surgeons performing eight elective Medicare procedures. Not every surgery will be here, but worth a look if you're having one of the eight listed.

#### Consider Financial Incentives

Some medical providers accept payments and kickbacks from the pharmaceutical and medical device industries. This may influence them to use certain brands of surgical devices or medications even if it's not the best choice for you.

You can look up how much providers get paid by these industries using **ProPublica's Dollars for Docs Tool**.

Keep in mind, many medical professionals want the best for their patients and would never prescribe a treatment if it's not necessary. But financial incentives do sway some providers.

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### STEP 4: Prepare Before Surgery

- Fill out or update your **Prudent Patient Health Summary and Medication List**.
- Assign a support person (several if you can) to be with you in the hospital.
- Fill out or update your advance directives.
- Using a large piece of tape that you can write on, mark the correct site where your surgery is to be performed. For example, if you're having surgery on your left knee, write a note saying, 'Yes! Correct Side!' And on the right knee, leave a note saying, 'No! Wrong Side!'
- Confirm with your surgeon when you will need to stop eating and drinking. This is called being 'NPO.' Ask if this includes sips of water with your medications. Also ask how you should manage being NPO if you have diabetes.
- Ask which medications you should take the day of your surgery. Confirm if there are any you shouldn't be taking.
- Print out your **Prudent Patient Hospital Guide**. Don't forget to bring it with you.
- Print out your **Prudent Patient Surgery Safety Tag**. Don't forget to bring it with you.
- Take particularly good care of yourself in the days leading up to surgery. Eat well, hydrate, exercise and get plenty of rest.

### STEP 5: Be Prepared for Your Hospital Stay

If your surgery will be done in a hospital, use the **Prudent Patient Hospital Guide** to help you stay safe and get better care.

If you're having heart surgery, check the Society of Thoracic Surgeons surgical outcomes data for your hospital (if they have chosen to voluntarily report their data). The website is [publicreporting.sts.org](https://publicreporting.sts.org).

If you're having your procedure in an outpatient surgery center or clinic, you may still want to take a look at the Hospital Guide. It has useful information that applies to many healthcare settings.

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## STEP 6: After Surgery

- Ask your nurse to get you out of bed and moving as soon as possible. Early mobility can help prevent many complications including blood clots, pneumonia and constipation. If you're in too much pain, ask your nurse to give you something to ease your discomfort so you can get moving.
- You will likely be constipated due to anesthesia. If you are, ask for a laxative and/or stool softener to help you feel better faster.
- Be sure you understand the instructions provided to you by your surgeon and healthcare team. Follow these directions to help you recover faster. Ask if there is anything about your diet, daily activities, exercise or medications that you need to change.
- Ask what you need to do once you're discharged to recover best. This may be physical therapy, a new diet, or a different treatment regimen.
- Fill out your **Prudent Patient Hospital Discharge Checklist**
- Once you're discharged, call your surgeon if you experience any of these:
  - Fevers
  - Chills
  - Excessive pain
  - Tenderness, redness or oozing at surgical site
  - Feeling confused or 'fuzzy'
  - Just not feeling 'right'

You should also call your surgeon if you experience symptoms specific to your surgery. Your surgeon or nurse can tell you what these may be.

## STEP 7: Be Your Own Best Advocate

The very best thing you can do to get a better, safer surgery is take an active role in your healthcare. Be your own best advocate.

And be sure to assign a support person (several if you can) to stand by you through the entire process.

Find more free guides, tools and checklists at [prudentpatient.com](http://prudentpatient.com).