

SPEAK UP FOR BETTER SAFER HEALTH CARE

Making the right treatment decisions



Are you facing surgery or a treatment decision? Most surgery and treatments are not emergencies. This means you have time to ask questions about the treatment. To help you get the information you need, there are questions you can ask your doctor or health practitioner about your treatment.

Asking questions will help you understand more about your treatment so you can make the best decisions, taking into consideration your personal and family needs, the expected outcomes of each option and the likelihood that success or complications can occur.

What's in this brochure?

This brochure provides some useful suggestions and questions to assist you being more actively involved in your own healthcare.

What is informed consent?

Prior to having the procedure or treatment, your doctor is legally required to obtain informed consent. You will be asked to sign an informed consent form.

'Informed consent' means that your doctor has told you about the treatment or procedure and its risks. It also means that you understand what you were told. Following this explanation, you may take the information home for further consideration, or agree to sign a consent form to proceed with the treatment.

What should I do if I don't understand the informed consent form?

Ask your doctor to explain it. You can ask your doctor to recommend a patient advocate. This person helps patients understand their treatment and their choices in treatment.

Understanding my treatment options

Understanding complex medical treatments and healthcare can be difficult, particularly at a time

when you may be distressed about your condition or diagnosis. When making your decision whether to undergo a treatment, you should consider asking the following questions:

Why do I need to have this treatment?

- > Why is the treatment or procedure being done? There are many reasons for treatments. Some treatments can relieve or prevent pain. Others can reduce a symptom of a problem or improve some body function.
- > How long will the procedure last?
- > What will happen during the treatment? For example, if something is going to be inserted, repaired or taken out, ask why. Ask your doctor for an explanation of the treatment, written information and a diagram of any surgical procedure if relevant.
- > What other test or treatments will be used in the treatment?
- > Do I need to stop taking my current medications before or after the treatment?
- > Are there any patient advocates I can talk to? Preferably the advocate should not be employed by the hospital, clinic or laboratory that is doing the procedure or treatment.
- > Where can I go to get further information about my condition? Are there any local patient support groups with the same condition?

Are there alternative treatment options?

- > What are my treatment options? Most medical conditions will have more than one treatment option, and each option may have different risks and expected outcomes.
- > Ask why your doctor has chosen a particular treatment option. It is important that you know about the benefits and risks of each treatment

option and which treatments are available, in order for you to give your informed consent for the treatment or procedure.

- > What are my choices if I decide not to have the treatment?

What are the possible risks and complications?

- > For each treatment option, you need to know what the possible risks and benefits are, and then make a decision, from your own perspective, about which outcomes you are willing to accept. One type of surgery may mean that you are in hospital and recuperating for a shorter period than an alternative surgical treatment.
- > What are the frequent and serious risks?
- > What are my short term and long term (ongoing) risks?
- > Ask about any other side effects of the medicine, treatment, device or equipment.
- > What kind of anaesthesia (local or general) will I need and what are the risks? Why should I have this type of anaesthesia? Free booklets on what you should know about anaesthesia are available from the Australian Society of Anaesthetists at www.asa.org.au

What are the benefits of having the treatment?

- > Ask what will you gain by having the treatment? For example, a knee replacement may mean that you can walk again with ease and reduced pain.
- > For some treatments, the benefits only last a short time. You may need further treatment later. For others they may last a lifetime.

Will my specialist be doing the procedure or surgery?

- > Ask if the treatment will be done by your specialist, another doctor, or surgeon.

- > If it is another doctor, ask who will do the procedure and what are their qualifications. Ask about their recent success or complications with this treatment.
- > Ask your doctor about the success rate of the hospital you are being referred to.

Can the treatment make my condition worse or make other medical problems I have worse?

- > Could my condition get worse? What happens if it does?
- > What could happen to my other medical conditions during the procedure or treatment?
- > Can I stop having the treatment if I change my mind? Is there any danger if I stop the treatment?

How long will it take me to recover?

- > What will happen to me after the treatment? Ask for a copy of the treatment plan.
- > How long am I expected to stay in hospital? Ask how long it will take for me to recover.
- > Will I be able to continue seeing my own doctor after the treatment?
- > When can I start regular exercise again and go back to work?
- > Are there any activities that I should not do before or after the treatment?

Can I get a second opinion?

Yes, you are entitled to more than one opinion. Ask your general practitioner or surgeon for the name of a specialist. Only your general practitioner can write a letter of referral to see a specialist or surgeon.

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Understanding my procedure

When your doctor is explaining the procedure to you, it may help you to fill in the following page in your own words.

My doctor has informed me that my condition is called: _____

The procedure I will be having is called: _____

I understand that this will involve: _____

My doctor has explained to me that the benefits and possible positive and negative outcomes of me having this procedure are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

My doctor has explained to me that the possible risks of this procedure are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____