Is regional anaesthesia right for you?

Not all surgery needs to be done under general anaesthesia. Many patients can have pain-free surgery with regional anaesthesia, or regional block, which numbs only the part of the body being operated on. Patients can be awake and comfortable, or they can be lightly sedated, or they can have general anaesthesia as well, leaving them unconscious and unaware.

Common uses

Regional anaesthesia is often used for mothers having caesarean births – they are given epidurals or spinal blocks – for eye surgery, and for operations on arms and legs. It can be safer for patients with obesity, or lung disease and for older patients or other patients who are frail. But it is not for every patient and not for every procedure. For example, it may not be suitable for patients having certain kinds of neurosurgery, or as the only form of anaesthesia for abdominal or chest surgery.

Regional anaesthesia can bring these benefits:

- **Good pain control:** Regional anaesthesia makes the affected part of the body numb to pain, and can be continued for some time after surgery, offering pain relief afterwards. There is also evidence that regional anaesthesia can help prevent the development of chronic pain after surgery – a regional block now can mean less pain later.

- **Faster recovery:** When there is less pain, and consequently fewer painkillers, patients can move around sooner, eat and drink sooner, and go home sooner.

- **Fewer side-effects:** Regional anaesthesia given alone cuts out the risks of general anaesthesia, which can include stresses on breathing or the heart, allergic reactions, and vomiting afterwards. If given with a general anaesthetic, it means a lighter general anaesthetic can be given – also reducing risks. If continued after surgery, it means fewer opioids for pain relief – which means less nausea, constipation and fuzzy-headedness.

- **Less stress on the body:** Research suggests that surgery under regional anaesthesia helps preserve the immune system, which might help protect the body’s ability to heal wounds and fight cancer. Regional anaesthesia is thought to be less of a challenge to the body for very sick people and for the elderly.

It is important to talk to your anaesthetist, who will advise you on what is best for your individual situation.

Anaesthetists – caring for the body and its breath of life.

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