Royal College of Anaesthetists

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Patient Information Forum

# General anaesthetics:
## Risks and side effects

Everyone is different and it is not possible to know who will experience a side effect or risk. Some are more likely in people who have existing health conditions or need certain operations.

The numbers below are averages from research studies. The people in the studies usually had routine surgery, were a healthy weight and did not have specific health conditions.

You can find out about the research we used here: rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risks/evidence.

**Your risks might be higher or lower than these numbers. Your anaesthetist will discuss with you the risks that are more likely, or significant, for you.**

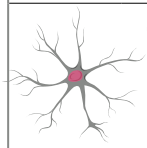
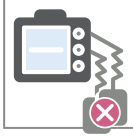
You can find information about the different types of anaesthesia here: rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/resources.

**These numbers are out of every 100 people.**

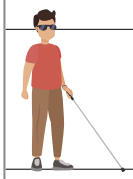
| What happened? | For how long? | How many? Out of every 100 people (one hundred people) |
|---|---|---|
|  **Shivering** | For 20–30 minutes in the recovery room | **15** did — **85** did not |
|  **Nausea (feeling sick)** | For 1–24 hours | **About 15** did — **About 85** did not |
|  **Sore throat** | For 24–48 hours | **20–40** did — **60–80** did not<br>Depends on the kind of breathing tube used |
|  **Bruising or pain** from injections. | Goes away in a few days | **10** did — **90** did not |
|  **Minor lip or tongue injury** | Heals in a few days | **1–5** did — **95–99** did not |
|  **Chest infection** More likely for smokers, people with existing medical conditions and people requiring certain types of surgery. | For days or weeks | **2–20** did — **80–98** did not |
|  **Becoming confused (delirium)** More likely for older patients with existing medical conditions having complex or emergency surgery. | For days, weeks or months | **10–50** did — **50–90** did not |

## The risks on this page are rare.

### These numbers are out of every 10,000 people.

| What happened? | For how long? | How many? Out of every 10,000 people (ten thousand people) | |
|---|---|---|---|
|  **Damage to teeth** | Needs to be seen by a dentist | **5** did | **9,995** did not |
|  **Blurred vision, eye irritation or pain** due to a small scratch or dry eyes. | A few days | **About 5** did | **About 9,995** did not |
|  **Tingling, numbness, pain or weakness** (nerve damage). | Temporary (weeks to months) | **1–5** did | **9,995–9,999** did not |
| | Permanent | **1** did | **9,999** did not |
|   **Severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis)** | Happens quickly Treated immediately | **1** did | **9,999** did not |
|  **Cardiac arrest, eg heart stopping during surgery** | Treated immediately | **3** did | **9,997** did not |

### These numbers are out of every 100,000 people.

| What happened? | How many? Out of every 100,000 people (one hundred thousand people) | |
|---|---|---|
|  **Woke up for a short time** during general anaesthetic (accidental awareness). | **5** were | **99,995** were not |
| | 3–4 in every 100,000 said that it lasted less than five minutes, before surgery or after it had finished | |
| | About 1 in every 100,000 said that they felt some pain | |
|  **Lost their sight (went blind)** due to pressure or blood clots affecting the optic nerve. | **1** did | **99,999** did not |
|  **Died from complications of surgery** | **14** did | **99,986** did not |
| **Died due to cardiac arrest during or just after surgery** | **1** did | **99,999** did not |
| **Died due to the anaesthetic** | **1** did | **99,999** did not |
| This risk varies greatly. For example, it is higher for certain surgeries, or if people were frail, older or had certain health conditions. | | |

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Find out more about these risks in more detail below:

**rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risk-leaflets**