

I Need a Caesarian

Anaesthesia for a Caesarian Section

About 1 in 10 women will require a Caesarian delivery for the birth of their baby. This may be 'elective' in that this is planned early in the pregnancy—usually because you have had a previous Caesarian or the baby is lying in an unusual position—or it may be an 'emergency'. An emergency Caesarian is usually done because your obstetrician feels that there is too much risk to the mother or baby if the birth is allowed to proceed along natural lines.

An emergency Caesarian can be very disappointing to the parents as most people want a natural childbirth and you will have very little time to come to terms with the change in your plans. It often seems that everything becomes very rushed and that you are no longer in control.

Before your Caesarian

Your Anaesthetist will visit you before your operation. This may be on the ward—elective patients usually come in to hospital the same day as their operation—or for emergencies in the labour ward or theatre reception area.

Your Anaesthetist needs to assess your general level of fitness and discuss the options/risks and benefits for your anaesthetic. You can then choose what type of anaesthetic you want, or your Anaesthetist can choose for you if you prefer.

What I need to tell my Anaesthetist

To assess your general health, your Anaesthetist will want to know about:

- ~ Previous operations and anaesthetics, especially any problems experienced
- ~ Problems during the pregnancy, especially with heartburn or blood pressure
- ~ Any history of chronic illnesses, especially heart and lung disease, diabetes, back problems
- ~ Medications you are taking—this includes prescribed, herbal and recreational drugs, cigarettes and alcohol. Abnormal reactions or allergies to drugs.
- ~ If you have any dental work or loose teeth

Depending on your answers to these questions your Anaesthetist may wish to examine your heart, lungs and mouth. Please be honest when answering these questions as we are only trying to provide the safest service we can for you.

Types of Anaesthetic

The great majority of Caesarians are now done under a spinal anaesthetic. This is because most parents want to be present and awake when their child is born. Also the risks of an anaesthetic are slightly higher when you are pregnant and a spinal anaesthetic can reduce some of these risks. However some mothers find the prospect of being awake during surgery too terrifying; please discuss this with your Anaesthetist as a general anaesthetic is quite acceptable. See below for comparisons of general and spinal anaesthetics.

The third option is for an epidural anaesthetic which is very similar to a spinal anaesthetic. Epidurals for Caesarians are now uncommon—spinals are judged to be easier and more effective—unless it is an emergency Caesarian and you have already had an epidural inserted during your labour. For the surgery the epidural can be 'topped up' with a stronger type of local anaesthetic that will numb your lower body completely.

What happens with a spinal?

On arriving in the theatre suite, you and your partner will be taken to the anaesthetic room where there may be several people; your Anaesthetist, your midwife, a theatre technician and an anaesthetic nurse. An intravenous needle will be inserted in to your arm or hand and this will be used to give you some fluids to prevent the drop in blood pressure that occurs with a spinal block (due to the blood vessels dilating).

You will then be placed in to the correct position for the spinal. Usually this means sitting with your legs over the side of the bed. Less commonly you will be asked to lie on your left side and curl up in to a ball. Your back will be washed with some antiseptic solution and some sterile towels placed on your back. The Anaesthetist will feel the bones in your spine and then inject a small amount of local anaesthetic in to the skin so the longer spinal needle doesn't worry you as much.

Advantages of a spinal anaesthetic

- ~ You can be awake and alert during the birth
- ~ Your partner or a support person can be present
- ~ You can take pictures/video of the birth
- ~ Less pain will be experienced immediately postoperatively
- ~ Less nausea and vomiting
- ~ Safer than a general anaesthetic in some situations

Disadvantages of a spinal anaesthetic

- ~ Some people are very anxious at the thought of being awake during surgery
- ~ Some people may experience nausea or dizziness during the procedure as the blood pressure may decrease—usually easily remedied by your Anaesthetist
- ~ Some patients experience some pain or discomfort during the procedure—this is much less common than with epidurals
- ~ Shivering can occur—this is much less common than with epidurals
- ~ There are complications such as headache—rare—and nerve damage—extremely rare

General Anaesthetics

You may request or be advised to have a general anaesthetic for your Caesarian delivery. In this case you will not be able to have your partner present at the birth. The general procedure will follow the steps outlined in the “Day of the Procedure” information sheet. The only slight difference is that because of the pregnancy we need to take steps to reduce the risk of any stomach acid spilling in to the lungs while you are anaesthetised. This may include an antacid medication as a premed. Also, as you are drifting off to sleep, the anaesthetic nurse will place some firm pressure over your neck. You will wake up in the recovery room after the procedure and your baby will have been transported to the nursery to be kept warm. Pain relief will be administered in the form of a morphine drip (PCA) but you may experience some discomfort until adequate levels of this are achieved.

Advantages of a general anaesthetic

- ~ You don't know anything about the surgery
- ~ Safer than a spinal in some rare situations, for example severe bleeding

Disadvantages of a general anaesthetic

- ~ More pain immediately post-operatively. Although you will be given morphine in the recovery room but it may take a few minutes to safely reach adequate levels
- ~ You will not see your baby until you are back in the maternity ward
- ~ You may lose more blood during the operation
- ~ Risks such as breathing problems, awareness and allergy which are very rare these days but are more common than with spinals

Making a choice

For many people this is an easy choice, but you shouldn't be pushed in to something you don't want. Sometimes it will be much safer to choose one technique or the other because of your medical condition and your Anaesthetist or Obstetrician will inform you of this. Normally though, the choice is yours.

If you have questions or concerns please discuss them with your Anaesthetist before the operation.