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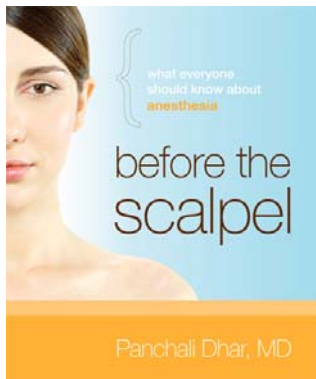
TRIAGE

Making sense of health care

By **Judith Graham**

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Questions to ask before anesthesia: Part 1



Smart patients know it's important to check a surgeon's credentials and experience before agreeing to undergo an operation.

But what about the anesthesiologist – the physician responsible for sedating you, administering painkillers and monitoring your vital signs during surgery?

Too often, patients don't inquire about this essential member of the medical team, according to **Dr. Panchali Dhar, the author of a new book, "Before the Scalpel: What Everyone Should Know About Anesthesia."**

In a conversation, Dhar, of New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center, outlined key questions that surgery patients should ask about anesthesia:

QUESTION: *Who will be providing my anesthetic care? An attending anesthesiologist? A resident anesthesiologist? A nurse anesthetist?*

If you're at a teaching hospital, it's likely that a resident – a doctor in the advanced stages of his medical training – will be providing anesthesia. All residents are supposed to be supervised by a senior attending physician. Typically the attending doctor will be on site, but that's not always the case.

"If you want an attending physician to administer anesthesia or to be present during your surgery, speak up and ask," Dhar advises. Especially in July and August, when a new crop of residents begin working in hospitals, you may want to request being treated by a senior doctor, she says.

As for nurse anesthetists, they're highly trained professionals who typically deliver excellent care. "If I had to choose between a new resident and a nurse anesthetist, I'd choose the nurse," Dhar says.

QUESTION: *If anesthesia will be provided by a nurse anesthetist will she be under the direct supervision of a physician?*

Fourteen states allow nurse anesthetists to practice without supervision; 36 states, including Illinois, require physician oversight. If you're concerned about the qualifications of the nurse anesthetist, ask her what her educational background is, where she's worked and for how long, what special training she's received, and how many times she's worked on cases such as yours, Dhar recommends.

QUESTION: *Is this person providing my care board certified?*

Absolutely, you want an anesthesiologist who's been certified by the American Board of Anesthesiology. A professional stamp of approval ensures that your doctor has received thorough training in this specialty.

If you're a complicated patient with heart disease and diabetes, for example, or obesity and hypertension, you'll probably meet with your anesthesiologist two or three days before surgery. Put together a list of questions to ask at that time.

Be sure to find out from the anesthesiologist how often he or she has participated in surgeries such as the one you'll be having. At a minimum, you'll want the doctor or the nurse anesthetist to have been involved in 10 to 20 surgeries, Dhar says.

QUESTION: *Where is my procedure being performed? A hospital operating room? An ambulatory surgery center? A doctor's office?*

If the procedure is scheduled outside a hospital, find out what the emergency backup plan is. What medical center would you be transferred to if something goes wrong?

Whom would you call late at night or on weekends if you're experiencing complications?

If you're getting anesthesia in a doctor's office, ask who's going to be administering the medications, where they were trained, how long they've worked there, and what other qualifications they have.

Most importantly, Dhar says, don't have multiple procedures in a doctor's office involving anesthesia on the same day. "That's when things can really go wrong," she warns.

QUESTION: *Does the facility where my surgery will take place maintain active accreditation? By which organization?*

Wherever you're planning to have surgery, you'll want to make sure the medical center is licensed and accredited by organizations such as the Joint Commission or the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities.

Questions to ask before anesthesia: Part 2

It behooves you to find out as much as you can about your anesthesiologist and your proposed anesthesia regimen before having surgery. Here are important questions to ask, according to Dr. Panchali Dhar, author of a new book, *Before the Scalpel: What Everyone Should Know About Anesthesia*:

QUESTION: *What types of anesthesia are commonly provided for the procedure I am having? Which ones have you selected for me? Why? What are my options?*

Some surgeries can be done with general or regional anesthesia. If you want to be asleep, realize you're going to have a longer recovery: probably two to three days of lethargy, Dhar says. If you want a faster recovery – say because you'd like to get back to work quickly – a regional anesthetic may be more to your liking.

The important thing is to understand the pros and cons of your options and "not to force yourself to get something you really don't want," Dhar explains.

QUESTION: *Will any special monitors (for the heart or brain) be used during my surgery? If so, will a technician for these monitors be assigned?*

Many people have heard horror stories about "anesthesia awareness" – patients who are awake but unable to communicate during surgery – and many patients are afraid of this rare phenomenon.

Patients at higher risk of anesthesia awareness include those who are physically compromised and therefore require lower doses of anesthesia drugs, including unstable accident and trauma victims and pregnant women who need emergency Cesarean sections.

Dhar says she'll give memory blockers before surgery to patients who might be at risk of anesthesia awareness and use a brain monitor to determine if they're conscious or not. If patients are worried, they should ask their anesthesiologist what precautions, if any, will be taken to guard against anesthesia awareness and recall.

QUESTION: *Where will I recover after surgery? In the recovery room? In the intensive care unit? At home? Who will be monitoring me during recovery? When will I be able to see my loved ones?*

If you're having an outpatient surgery, you'll want to make sure someone is there to help you get home and be with you if there's a complication, Dhar says. Also, ask if there are plans to make sure your discomfort is manageable and whom you should contact if something goes wrong.

Let your anesthesiologist know in advance if you're prone to motion sickness and ask her to use anti-nausea medications if you're worried about getting sick after surgery. Also, be sure to tell her about any other problems you've had previously with anesthesia.

QUESTION: *When am I supposed to stop eating and drinking before my procedure?*

It's probably OK to have dry toast and tea six hours before surgery, but nothing more. Don't eat fatty foods the night before, Dhar recommends. Clear liquids are generally OK up to two hours before surgery.

Add to your list of questions: What medical tests do I need before surgery? Patients with multiple conditions will probably want to have a comprehensive checkup by their primary care physician. If your anesthesiologist isn't satisfied that all needed tests have been performed, he can cancel the surgery at the last minute.

QUESTION: *What is the plan for pain control after my procedure?*

The plan can mean a prescription for painkillers, or it can mean newer techniques, such as being fitted temporarily with a catheter that can deliver pain medications via a pump directly to your surgery site.. Ask your anesthesiologist beforehand: What do you think is the best strategy for me?



About Judith Graham

Getting the medical care you need isn't easy. Resources can be hard to find. Weighing the costs and benefits of proposed interventions can be difficult. Choosing a doctor or a hospital, negotiating with your insurer, staying on top of treatment trends, getting the best care possible -- all these can be nerve-wracking. This blog will bring you useful information, connect you with important resources and highlight the stories of other people like you.

<http://newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/triage/2009/01/questions-to-ask-before-anesthesia-part-2.html#more>

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