

Anaphylaxis in the Operating Room: Patient Information

What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is a rare but life-threatening allergic reaction that can occur after exposure to drugs or substances during your procedure. Features of anaphylaxis include a fall in blood pressure, rapid heart rate, breathing/airway difficulties and rashes and swelling. Unfortunately it is not possible to predict when or if anaphylaxis will occur. Sometimes, other things that are not allergy/anaphylaxis can also cause a similar reaction.

What happens in hospital after I have a reaction?

If your reaction was severe, it may not have been possible to start or complete your procedure. You may have received adrenaline and other medications that help your blood pressure or your breathing/airway difficulties or rashes and swelling. You may have been transferred to the intensive care unit. Your anaesthetist will usually visit you before you leave hospital to discuss the event and provide a written document summarising what happened. This document usually includes a list of the drugs or substances you were given during your procedure.

If you don't receive this document, you should ask for one. It is important that you keep this document and show it to your anaesthetist if you have another operation before you get tested for your allergy.

What happens next?

Your anaesthetist or surgical team will usually refer you to a specialised centre for anaesthetic allergy testing. The testing centre will contact you with an appointment time. You will be seen usually by an allergist/immunologist and/or anaesthetist. At your first consultation, testing will usually include blood tests as well as skin tests, where tiny amounts of diluted drugs and substances will be injected into your arm.

If the testing centre does not get in touch with you, please contact your GP and show them the allergy document you received or tell them what happened while you were in hospital.

What should I do if I need another anaesthetic in the future?

When you are seen at the anaesthetic allergy clinic, the doctors will provide you with all the information you need to make your subsequent anaesthetics as safe as possible.

If you need an urgent procedure before you are seen at the anaesthetic allergy clinic, please advise your doctors that you had a complication following anaesthesia and show your doctors all the letters given to you by the previous anaesthetist or surgical team.