

Choosing Surgeons and Settings

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After making the decision to undergo surgery, you may think that you have done everything that an active patient can do. There are, however, other choices that you will need to make. Two important ones are: who do you want to perform the operation and where do you want it to take place. How many steps you take to make this choice are up to you. For instance, you may feel confident using the surgeon that was referred by your primary-care doctor and, similarly, the hospital or outpatient surgical center suggested by the surgeon. Going this route is fine if that's what you want because, in the end, it is your choice. There are other steps that can be taken, however. What follows are suggestions based on a three-step approach ranging from asking questions to doing research.

"Hold on," you may say, "how can I be expected to go through a whole rigmarole when my condition – the reason I need the surgery, or to be hospitalized, in the first place – is leaving me too mentally and physically exhausted to do anything beyond the ordinary. And sometimes I can't even do that!"

That's a good question. Here are two answers. First and foremost, you may be the one who needs information but, if you are not up to the task of getting it, someone else can search for it. Perhaps family and friends can help. Second, as stated above, how much of the rigmarole you follow is up to you. As always, there is no one right approach to decisionmaking. There are also no guarantees that going whole hog on the process suggested here will lead to the exact outcomes you want. On the other hand, it can help you set the stage so that you have the best opportunity for things to go according to plans.

A Three-Step Approach to Making Choices

Because the search for answers sometimes raises more questions, any or all of the following three steps may be repeated as necessary:

- **Ask yourself** what you want (in a surgeon and in a surgical setting).
- **Ask others** what they think is important when making these decisions.
- Do some **research**.

When Choosing a Surgeon

Ask yourself: What do you want in a surgeon? While it's likely that you will want someone who is a skilled surgeon, you might also ask yourself how important a good "bedside manner" is to you. That is, do you want someone who will clearly and patiently answer your questions? Do you want someone who understands what you are going through and is compassionate? Or is finding a surgeon who knows what he or she is doing, and is good at doing it, the only thing that really counts for you?

Ask others: While people might disagree about how important it is for surgeons to relate well to patients, it's hard to imagine any disagreement about the importance of surgical skills. After all, there's no getting around the fact that it can be a matter of life and death. For surgeries that are more difficult or unusual, the surgeon's level of skill is even more important. Because skill tends to increase with experience, a variety of patient advocates and professional organizations, including the [American College of Surgeons](#), urge patients to ask the surgeons they are considering, questions such as:

- *What is your experience with this operation?*
- *How many times in a year do you do it?*
- *How successful have you been?*
- *How many of your patients have died?*

In addition to speaking directly with surgeons, you can turn to other healthcare professionals for input. For instance, you can ask them what they think is important when selecting a surgeon. Unless you have a personal relationship with them, doctors and nurses are not likely to suggest one surgeon over another, or to tell you which surgeons to avoid. At the same time, primary care practitioners often refer their patients to particular specialists, including surgeons. While this suggests that they think highly of those surgeons, it might be a good idea to clarify that by asking them:

- *Why are you suggesting I see this doctor?*
- *Who would you go to if you needed this surgery? Why?*

Do Some Research: A great deal of information is available to you if you want to find out what to look for in surgeons and what questions to ask. In many cases, you can also find information about particular doctors [see [Information Resources](#)]. That is, you can find information about their education, their experience, and any disciplinary or legal actions that might have been taken against them. Where information is available, pay attention to the dates. Many lists are not current and provide statistics that may be old. A surgeon with a lot of experience now may have been listed with little experience because the time frame for the list is several years earlier. Also, when it comes to legal actions (regarding malpractice, criminal convictions, hospital restrictions and so on), physician profiles generally don't reveal charges of professional misconduct unless investigations of those charges have resulted in legal or disciplinary actions. While the information on doctors may not be complete, you may still find it helpful and worth checking out.

When Choosing a Setting

Once you've chosen your surgeon, your choice of hospitals (or outpatient surgical center) will be limited to the ones in which the surgeon has privileges (has been granted permission to operate there). Some people however, choose a hospital or medical center first – usually because it has high marks for treating their particular conditions. In that case, they will then have to choose a surgeon from among those who have privileges there. Whichever situation you find yourself in, the three-step approach to making your decision is useful here, as well. And information about hospitals and outpatient settings is also available from a variety of sources.

What should you choose first – the surgeon or the setting? This is a “chicken or the egg” type of question that only you will be able to answer for yourself. Both have advantages and disadvantages. While there is no denying that the setting is important, there’s a good argument to be made that what’s more important is the surgeon and the surgical team. That being said, if your interest lies in finding a hospital or high-tech medical center that specializes in your types of surgeries, it’s also likely that you will be able to find well-qualified surgeons practicing there. Sounds good, right? It has been for many and may be, for you, as well. Before deciding, however, it would be helpful for you to ask yourself and others some key questions.

Ask yourself: Let’s assume that you have found great surgeons at two really good hospitals – one local and one distant – with each offering slightly different advantages. In choosing between the two, you might want to ask yourself:

- *How important, to you, is it:*
 - *for family and friends to be nearby so they can visit you.*
 - *for you to have one or more of them there with you – to advocate for you and to help catch any medical errors before they occur?*
 - *for you to have your primary-care practitioner nearby and available to give his or her input?*
- *Are these things important enough for you to choose the local hospital?*
- *Do the advantages of the distant hospital outweigh your interest in having nearby family support?*

Ask others: Here, too, you can ask your **primary care-practitioner** what he or she thinks you should look for in a hospital. While, again, they are not likely to tell you to avoid a particular hospital, you can ask them where they would go if they needed your surgery – if they could go anywhere *and* if they were limited to your local or regional area. Asking them ‘*Why?*’ is also a good idea. **Family and friends** who’ve been in hospitals may also be sources of information. Just remember, however, that what pleases or upsets people differs from person to person. So after they give their personal opinions, ask them, ‘*Why?*’ This can help you figure out if you would feel the same way.

There are also questions you can ask **the hospitals** you are considering. Who you approach in the hospital will depend on your question. If you don’t know to whom you should talk, you can ask to speak with the hospital’s Patient Representative or their Director of Patient Services. Tell them the types of questions you have. They may be able to provide answers or direct you to the right person. Questions you might ask include:

- *What is your visitation policy? Can I have someone stay with me even at night?*¹
- *What systems do you have in place to prevent medication errors and promote patient safety?*
- *What support services do you provide?*
- *How many patients are assigned to each RN – on each shift? (The [International Council of Nurses](#) recommends no more than four patients to one RN, during the day shift, in general medical and surgical units.)²*
- *Do you have Patient Representatives to advocate for patients?*
- *What arrangements can I make to pay off my portion of the hospital charges?*

Do Some Research: Is the hospital or outpatient surgical center accredited? What is its rating? Does the hospital specialize in treating your condition? What is the hospital's reputation? How does it compare with other hospitals? Are there public records of death rates related to procedures performed at particular hospitals (for instance, Coronary Bypass Surgery)? Has the hospital had complaints lodged against it? How many of those complaints were upheld after investigation? Answers to these and other questions can be found by clicking on "information resources" above. Most of these are on the Internet, which is accessible from many library computers if not from your home.□

¹ For the benefits of family involvement, see the [Review](#) of *Help Me to Heal*.

² See [Nurse-Patient Ratio Fact Sheet](#)

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