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Deciding About Surgery

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Your doctor has just told you that you need surgery. What can you do? Despite all the talk about patients taking charge of their care, it may seem hard to imagine doing that when the treatment of choice is surgery. After all, so much of the care involved requires skilled experts: surgeons, an anesthetist and professional nurses. As it turns out, though, there is much that patients can do.

We should begin, however, by making some things clear. First, the following suggestions are for situations in which surgery is an actual choice (elective surgery) not for life-and-death *emergency* situations. There is a time and place for patients to take charge. Facing life-saving surgery as the result of a car accident, for instance, is usually not one of them. At those times, it is often best to rely on the medical expertise of healthcare professionals.

There are times, though, when patients do have choices to make about surgery – beginning with whether, or not, to have it. This leads to the second point, which is that talk of having a choice and taking charge is usually *not* related to the seriousness of the surgery or the condition that led the doctor to say you need it. Whether you are deciding about life-saving cardiac by-pass surgery or a facelift, the key to whether it is appropriate to take charge has to do with your ability to carefully think out how you want to proceed.

This means, for one thing, that you will need to learn about your condition and treatment options, beginning by asking your doctor questions. Asking questions is so important that both the [Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#), a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the [American College of Surgeons](#), among others, urge patients (or their advocates) to ask:

Questions About Treatment Options

- Why do I need an operation?
- What kind of operation are you suggesting?
- How will it affect my health and quality of life?
- What are its known risks and benefits?
- What should I expect if I **don't** have the operation?
- Are there other possible treatments besides surgery?
- What are the known risks and benefits of each?
- Where can I get a second opinion?

Questions About the Surgery and Recovery

- Where will it take place?
- What kind of anesthesia will I need?
- Will I need to stay in the hospital?
- What can I expect during the recovery period?
- What will it cost me?

Asking is just the beginning. You and your doctors should also discuss what they have told you. Sometimes it will raise more questions and you might need to first do your homework before having more discussion. Of course all of this takes some time and you may be feeling a powerful need to deal with your problem as quickly as possible. If that is the case, it might help if you were to also ask your doctors how much time you can reasonably take to figure things out. One important benefit of taking the time to learn what you can about your condition and treatment options is that as you learn about these things, you may also learn more about what is important to you in life. This can be vital when it comes to making healthcare decisions.□

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