

# DETAILED RISKS OF GENERAL AND REGIONAL ANAESTHESIA

**General anaesthesia** involves rendering a patient unconscious before and during the operation. This ensures the patient is not aware of events and does not feel pain during the operation. It is produced by drugs administered via a vein, and/or breathed from an anaesthesia machine.

**Regional anaesthesia** involves using a local anaesthetic to numb a specific area of the body for surgery. *Regional anaesthesia may comprise of an epidural, spinal anaesthesia, or an individual nerve block of a limb.* Regional anaesthesia is often used in conjunction with general anaesthesia.

Your safety and comfort are of the utmost importance, and your anaesthetist will take every care to ensure that any potential risks are kept to a minimum. However, there are unavoidable risks and complications associated with anaesthesia, of which you need to be aware.

## RISKS

*Due to its exceptional level of training and regulation Australia has one of the best safety records in the world. Death or permanent disability related to anaesthesia is exceptionally rare.*

### **Common risks include:**

- Bruising at the site of injections or drips – almost 100%
- Nausea or vomiting (although the anaesthetist will limit or prevent this as far as possible)
- Sore throat from the gases and/or the breathing tube. You may notice temporary difficulty in speaking. This should improve after some hours
- Temporary muscle pains
- Temporary headache or blurred vision
- Drowsiness

### **Uncommon risks include:**

- Awareness of activity in the operating room during anaesthesia, particularly during certain operations and in some emergency situations.
- Eye abrasions causing pain and requiring treatment with medication and patching.
- Damage to teeth or dental work, lips, voice box or tongue.
- Longer procedures lasting several hours have a higher risk of:
  - Blood clots in deep veins (deep vein thrombosis) - we minimize this risk with the use of DVT stockings and calf compressors, as well as blood thinners, where appropriate.
  - Due the prolonged immobility, compression of nerves in your arms or legs is possible, which can give rise to a prolonged, altered post-operative sensation or motor function in a limb. This usually takes the form of some numbness or 'pins and needles' that resolves in days but may persist. We try to minimize this risk by careful positioning on the operating table.

### **Extremely rare risks.** *These may cause brain damage and/or death and include:*

- Obstruction in the breathing passages that cannot be readily controlled. This can lead to severe difficulty with breathing.
- Allergy to drugs causing wheezing and rash, and in rare cases, severe swelling, low blood pressure, and poor circulation.
- Inherited muscle sensitivity to particular anaesthetic drugs (malignant hyperthermia). This can cause a rapid rise in temperature, heart rate, and breathing with high blood pressure and muscle rigidity.
- Heart attacks, strokes, and pneumonia. While these are uncommon, the risks are higher for patients with diseases of the arteries or lungs, and in smokers.

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**Regional anesthesia may comprise an epidural, spinal anaesthesia, or an individual nerve block of a limb.**

*Regional anaesthesia may be performed in conjunction with a general anaesthetic or may be used as the sole anaesthetic without a general anaesthetic.*

*Regional anaesthesia has some of the risks listed above and several other risks or consequences:*

- Muscle weakness in the anaesthetized limb. This will resolve as the block wears off.
- Epidural and spinal anaesthesia can cause a headache, which is usually short-lived, but can be severe and last for some days.
- Damage to nearby blood vessels or organs, e.g., lungs.
- Backache may follow spinal or epidural anaesthesia. This usually improves quickly, but occasionally can be longer lasting.
- There is a very small risk of infection or bleeding at the injection site, which may require antibiotic or surgical treatment.
- Rarely, nerves may be damaged resulting in long-term weakness, pain, altered sensation, or paralysis.

**Note** There may be other unusual risks that have not been listed in this document. Please ask your anaesthetist if you have any general or specific concerns.

