Preparing for surgery: Fitter Better Sooner

The resources in this toolkit are designed to help you get fitter and better prepared for surgery. Evidence shows that fitter patients recover from surgery quicker and experience fewer complications and delays.

UP TO **50%**

Research shows a 50% reduction in complications when patients are well prepared for surgery.†

This information will be particularly useful to people who are considering having surgery or are on a waiting list for surgery (elective surgery). It has been written by healthcare professionals from various medical specialties working together with patient representatives.

You can view the accompanying animation on our YouTube Channel (www.youtube.com/@RcoaAcUk).

Your surgical journey

Your surgical journey begins the moment that you are referred to the surgical team to discuss the option for surgery and ends when you are fully recovered.

Taking an active role in planning and preparing for your surgery will help you feel in control, get the best possible results and leave hospital sooner.

There are different things that you can do depending on where you are on the surgical journey. You will also meet different healthcare professionals along the way who will work together and with you to make your surgery go as smoothly as possible. What you do now can have a really big impact.

Every surgical journey is different. Yours will depend on the type of surgery that you are having, your general health, your age and any pre-existing medical conditions. We hope that the information below will help guide you along your surgical journey and get you fitter, better, sooner.

†Perioperative – reduces postoperative complications and length of hospital stay. Moving Medicine (https://bit.ly/MM-LOS).

Deciding on surgery

This is an important step in the journey. At this stage you will have a number of conversations with various healthcare professionals about why they think that you may need surgery. This could be your GP, a surgeon or a specialist doctor or a combination of these.

The aim of these conversations is to help you understand the benefits and risks of having surgery and to decide together with the healthcare professionals about whether or not to go ahead with it. This is known as 'shared decision-making' – it means that you and your healthcare professional or healthcare team work together to decide on your treatment based on:

- the healthcare professional's expert advice – treatment options, evidence, risks and benefits
- what is important to you – your preferences, personal circumstances, goals, values and beliefs.

You might find it helpful to think of some questions ahead of these conversations. See the following examples:

1. What are the benefits for me?
2. What are the risks for me if I have surgery?
3. What are the alternatives to surgery?
4. What happens if I decide not to have surgery?
5. How will surgery impact my everyday life? Will it make it better or worse?
6. How long will my recovery take?
7. What can I do to reduce my risks?

Sometimes options are limited and surgery may be the best option for you, but these conversations and asking the right questions will still help you to understand your risks from the surgery and all the things that you can do to reduce them.

Where can I find help and more information?

Find out more about shared decision-making on the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) website: **https://bit.ly/NICE-SDMinfo**.

Below are some tools that you can use to make the most of your discussions with the healthcare team.

- Choosing Wisely UK BRAN framework – use this as a reminder to ask questions about treatment (**https://bit.ly/CWUK_BRAN**).
- Centre for Perioperative Care – CPOC has produced an animation to explain shared decision-making (**www.cpoc.org.uk/shared-decision-making**).

Months before the surgery

In many cases there may be a bit of a wait before you can have surgery. But you can use this time to work on healthy habits and prepare your body for the operation. If you are not in as good a physical condition as possible, this can delay things even more and sometimes result in the cancellation of your surgery.

Roger's story: 'I was overweight and a lifelong smoker. The surgeon and anaesthetist had already told me that my surgery would be more difficult and that I would need to stay in the high dependency unit (HDU) afterwards, which might delay the date of my surgery if a bed wasn't available.'

There are many changes that you can make to reduce your risks ahead of surgery. Small changes can make a big difference, but it's important to start early, ideally as soon as you know that you will be having surgery. Below are some of the things that you can do to get yourself ready for surgery.

Roger's story: 'My anaesthetist spoke to me about some changes that I could start to make to help my recovery and encouraged me to read the information in Fitter Better Sooner and watch the animation on YouTube (**https://www.youtube.com/@RcoaAcUk**). That evening I watched the animation with my family. My daughter knew how worried I really was. They encouraged me to have a go at making some lifestyle changes.'

Increase physical activity

Your heart and lungs have to work harder after an operation to help your body to heal. If you are already active, they will be used to this. If you are not very active, try to increase your activity levels.

Brisk walking, swimming and cycling are all helpful, but the key thing is to find something that you enjoy and can stick with it.

Consider the following when choosing an activity.

- It should be something that you can do four or five times a week for 30 minutes. You can start with once or twice a week for 15 minutes and build on that.
- You may feel a little out of breath when exercising. This is normal. Start slowly and stop if you feel unwell, very breathless, dizzy, or in pain.
- Stop and ask for medical advice if you develop new problems, including chest pain or dizziness or your heartbeat becomes irregular.
- Add activities that improve your strength and balance to help your recovery, for example, daily 'sit-to-stand' or stair-climbing exercises.
- If your mobility is limited there are exercises that you can do sitting down.
- Ask for advice at your GP surgery if you are not sure where to start. Depending on where you live, it might be possible to refer you to an exercise scheme or health coach.

Roger's story: 'I decided to start walking and tried to walk slightly further each day. Before I only walked somewhere if I really had to, but I really started to enjoy it. I felt myself getting fitter and also got to know the people living in my area.'

Where can I find help and more information?

- NHS Better Health – Get Active: www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active.
- NHS Live Well – Exercise: www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise.
- NHS Inform Scotland: www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living.
- NHS 111 Wales: https://bit.ly/49mte50.
- Northern Ireland – Health Wise referral scheme: https://bit.ly/get-healthwise.
- Centre for Perioperative Care: www.cpoc.org.uk/exercise.
- 10 Minute Low Impact Workout for Pre-Op Patients/Joe Wicks Workouts:
  - Standing workouts: https://bit.ly/YT-LowImpact.
  - Chair workouts: https://bit.ly/YT-Chair.

Choose nutritious foods

Eating a healthy diet before and after your surgery will help your body to heal faster and fight off infection. It can also help with weight management, blood sugar control and cardiovascular disease.

Add the following to your diet:

- natural, whole foods with fibre
- plenty of fruit and vegetables
- lean protein (chicken, fish, beans, tofu)
- good fats (vegetable seed oils and olive oil).

Avoid or have occasionally as a treat:

- heavily processed foods (takeaways, cakes, biscuits, crisps, some frozen ready meals)
- processed meats (ham, sausages, bacon)
- sugary drinks (fizzy drinks, juices, energy drinks, squash, flavoured milks), chocolate and sweets
- saturated fats (traditional margarine, butter, lard, ghee)
- added salt and salty foods.

Where can I get help and information?

- NHS Live Well – Eat Well: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well.
- NHS Better Health: www.nhs.uk/healthier-families.
- British Heart Foundation – Recipe finder: https://bit.ly/3OwlWov.
- Centre for Perioperative Care: www.cpoc.org.uk/nutrition.

Keep your weight in check

If you live with obesity or being overweight, losing weight will help reduce the stress on your heart and lungs during and after surgery. In some cases, surgery has to be postponed until a patient's weight is below a certain level.

Losing weight can also help you to:

- lower your blood pressure
- improve your blood sugar levels
- reduce pain in your joints
- allow you to exercise more easily
- reduce your risk of blood clots after surgery
- reduce your risk of wound infections after surgery
- reduce the risks associated with having an anaesthetic.

Roger's story: 'I lost 4kg in the months before my surgery. Feeling healthier and fitter gave me a lot more confidence going in for my surgery. I had been quite depressed and worried about it before.'

Where can I get help and information?

- Your GP surgery or pharmacy: they can advise you on the support available to help you with weight management. You may also qualify for treatments, such as weight loss drugs. Avoid buying weight loss drugs on the internet and without medical supervision. They may not be genuine and could be harmful, and you will not have the support and monitoring needed to keep you safe and get the best long-term results.
- Better Health – Lose Weight: **www.nhs.uk/better-health/lose-weight**.
- NHS healthier you: **https://healthieryou.org.uk**.
- NHS Type 2 Diabetes Path to Remission Programme: **https://bit.ly/4rvVKsu**.
- The NHS Digital Weight Management Programme: **https://bit.ly/NHS-digital-WM**.
- NHS 111 Wales: **https://111.wales.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Default.aspx**.
- NHS Inform Scotland – Weight loss: **www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/weight-loss**.

Cut back on alcohol

High levels of alcohol in the body at the time of surgery can increase many risks associated with surgery and anaesthesia, for example, it can:

- weaken your immune system
- affect your liver and weaken your body's ability to heal
- affect how your body reacts to the anaesthetic
- affect your mood and cause withdrawal symptoms after surgery. This could mean that you have to stay in hospital longer.

If you drink alcohol regularly, you should make sure that you are drinking within the recommended limits or lower (currently 14 units per week = six medium glasses of wine or six pints of beer). There is no safe amount when it comes to alcohol, but if you drink regularly sticking to a limit lowers the risk of harm. You should also avoid binge-drinking and have some days every week when you don't drink at all.

Where can I get help and information?

- NHS Better Health – Drink less alcohol: https://bit.ly/NHS-Drink-Less.
- NHS Alcohol Support: https://bit.ly/NHS-Alcohol-Advice.
- NHS 111 Wales – Alcohol: https://bit.ly/NHS-Alcohol-Misuse.
- Northern Ireland Drugs and Alcohol Services Directory: https://services.drugsandalcoholni.info.

Quit or reduce smoking and vaping

Stopping smoking is hard, but preparing for surgery offers a real opportunity to commit to quitting. Although vaping is considered less harmful, and can be used to help quit smoking, it also carries risks, especially if you need to have surgery.

Both smoking and vaping increase many risks and complications associated with surgery and anaesthesia, for example:

- less oxygen in the blood
- slower healing
- greater risk of infection
- problems with the heart and lungs
- longer stays in hospital or having to stay in intensive care after surgery.

The best thing is to quit for good, but the good news is that even quitting or cutting down shortly before surgery can make a difference.

> **Roger's story:** 'I had wanted to stop smoking for a long time but never had the will to go through with it. Understanding the risks helped me to get motivated. It was hard, but eventually I managed.'

Where can I get help and information?

- NHS Better Health – Quit smoking: www.nhs.uk/better-health/quit-smoking.
- Centre for Perioperative Care: www.cpoc.org.uk/stopping-smoking.

NHS Stop Smoking Services

England

- Find stop smoking services in England: https://bit.ly/England-Quit.
- Call the free Smokefree National Helpline on 0300 123 1044.

Scotland

- Find stop smoking services in Scotland: https://bit.ly/Scotland-Quit.
- Call the free Quit Your Way Scotland helpline on 0800 84 84 84.

Wales

- Find stop smoking services in Wales: https://bit.ly/Wales-Quit.
- Call the free Help Me Quit helpline on 0800 085 2219.

Northern Ireland

- Find stop smoking services in Northern Ireland. Call a provider in the town or city where you live (telephone numbers can be found here: https://bit.ly/NI-Quit.

Look after your mental health and wellbeing

Having surgery is a big moment in your life and it's normal to feel anxious about it. Many techniques, including mindfulness, relaxation and breathing exercises can help you relax before and after your surgery.

However, if the thought of going into hospital is making you very anxious or upset, it may be helpful to talk about your concerns with your GP.

Where can I get help and information?

- Preparing your mind before surgery: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/preparing-your-mind-surgery**.
- MIND: **www.mind.org.uk**.
- Centre for Perioperative Care – Mental health in the perioperative period: **www.cpoc.org.uk/mentalwellbeing**.
- England – NHS Mental Health Services: **https://bit.ly/NHS-Mental-Health**.
- Scotland – NHS Inform – Mental Health Services, NHS 24: **https://bit.ly/Scotland-Mental-Health**.
- Wales – NHS 111 Wales – Mental Health and Wellbeing: **https://bit.ly/Wales-Mental-Health**.
- Northern Ireland – NI Direct – Mental Health Support: **https://bit.ly/NI-Mental-Health**.

Get plenty of sleep

Sleep is also very important around the time of surgery. Before surgery, good sleep can help you manage anxiety and cope better if you feel stressed. It will also support a strong immune system and help you fight off infection.

After surgery good sleep is critical for your recovery.

- It promotes healing.
- It reduces the risk of complications.
- It helps manage pain.

If you suffer from insomnia or disturbed sleep and it is affecting your quality of life, you may wish to speak to your GP, who might be able to refer you for specialist support.

Where can I get help and information?

- NHS Better Health: how to fall asleep faster and sleep better: **https://bit.ly/NHS-Insomnia**.
- NHS Insomnia: **www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia**.

Control medical conditions

It is very important to make sure that medical conditions are as well controlled as possible in the months leading up to surgery. You should visit your GP well ahead of the surgery to make sure that everything is properly checked and that you are taking the right medications. You should receive an invitation to a preoperative assessment ahead of your surgery to check your general health. Before this appointment, you should try to make sure your health conditions are well controlled and bring a list of the medicines you currently take. If the preoperative assessment

team think that your medical conditions are not well controlled, they may need to postpone your surgery until they are. In some cases, your surgery could be cancelled on the day of the surgery if the team thinks that the risk is too high for you.

Below are some examples of common medical conditions that can lead to delays and cancellations if not well controlled:

- problems with the heart and high blood pressure
- problems with breathing and the lungs (for example, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or COPD and obstructive sleep apnoea)
- diabetes and high blood sugar levels
- ongoing or recurring infections (for example, chest or urinary tract infections)
- blood disorders (for example, low iron levels or blood-clotting problems)
- living with obesity and a high body mass index (BMI) – your BMI is a way to check if your weight is healthy for your height and if it is safe for you to have certain types of surgery (for example, joint replacements or hernia repairs).

Roger's story: 'I have diabetes but I didn't take it very seriously. I made an appointment at the GP surgery. The nurse helped me understand more about what food I should eat to better control my diabetes and encouraged me to gradually lose some weight. She gave me a machine to help me keep an eye on the sugar level in my blood.'

The preoperative assessment team will give you clear instructions if you need to stop or change how you take your medications before surgery. For this reason, it's important that they know about all the medications that you take, including those that are not prescribed through the NHS (for example, weight loss drugs or herbal remedies).

If you are taking medication for your mental health, it is important to let the team know about this during your preoperative assessment. They will usually ask you to continue this medication throughout your hospital stay. It is important to take it to the hospital with you. They can also help organise any specific support that you might need for your time in hospital or when you return home.

Make sure that your teeth are in a good condition

If you have loose teeth or crowns, a visit to the dentist may reduce the risk of damage to your teeth during an operation.

It's also important to have good dental hygiene and for your teeth and gums to be in good condition before the surgery. This will reduce the risk of infection.

Visit a dentist early because it can take months for certain dental treatments to be completed.

Where can I get help and information?

NHS healthy teeth and gums: www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-teeth-and-gums.

Finding a dentist

England

NHS dentists: https://bit.ly/NHS-Dentists.

Scotland

NHS Inform. Receiving NHS dental treatment in Scotland: **https://bit.ly/Scot-Dentists**.

Wales

NHS 111 Wales. Dentists FAQs: **https://bit.ly/Wales-Dentists**.

Northern Ireland

NI Direct. Seeing a dentist: **https://bit.ly/NI-Dentists**.

Weeks before the surgery

With surgery getting closer, now is the time to start thinking about the practicalities of going to hospital.

Attend the preoperative assessment

Make sure that you bring all the medications (NHS and privately prescribed) and any supplements that you take with you to your preoperative assessment appointment. It is also important to tell the preoperative assessment team about any new changes in your health or medications since the time that your surgeon put you on the list for surgery.

This is also a great opportunity to ask any questions or to share any new concerns that you might have.

Below are some things that you might like to ask the team, but you might also want to write your own questions down.

1. Should I stop taking my regular medication(s) on the day of surgery?
2. Will I need to stay overnight?
3. When should I stop eating and drinking?
4. Do I need to shave for the surgery?
5. What can I expect after surgery?
6. How much time off work will I need?
7. When will I be able to drive after surgery?
8. How long will my recovery take?

If you are still not sure that surgery is right for you, you can request a further appointment with your surgeon to go through the options available to you again. It is important to remember that you can change your mind at any stage of the surgical journey.

Arrange support for the day of the surgery and the days after

Now is a good time to discuss with your carers, or friends and family, what support you might need from them.

- Normally you will not be able to go home on your own after surgery, so you will need to arrange for an adult to collect you.
- Depending on the type of surgery and your condition after the surgery, they may also need to stay with you and help you for a few days when you are back home.

- If you have dependants and pets, arrange for someone to help you look after them while you are in hospital or recovering from surgery.
- You might feel a bit tired and confused after surgery, so best to make any financial arrangements or important payments before surgery.

Stock up on the essentials

Start thinking about stocking up on what you might need for your recovery, so you don't need to worry about it when you come back home from hospital, for example:

- stock up on household essentials and cupboard/freezer staples
- consider batch cooking and freezing home-made, nutritious meals to support your recovery
- buy some over-the-counter pain killers, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen
- make sure that you have enough batteries for hearing aids
- for a longer hospital stay, think about all the things that you will need and start packing (comfortable clothing, slippers, dressing gown, books, headphones, phone charger, sleep mask, ear plugs, etc).

Keep up with healthy habits

Keep up with your exercise routine, eating well and reducing alcohol. If you have not managed to quit smoking or vaping, try to start reducing now, aiming to stop completely a couple of days before the surgery.

Day before the surgery

On the day before surgery, you should:

- pack your hospital bag
- make sure that you have read all instructions carefully and know what you need to bring to the hospital
- make sure that the person who is taking you to and collecting you from hospital knows the times and locations for your surgery
- if you start feeling unwell or develop cold and flu symptoms, contact the hospital team using the number on your admission or appointment letter
- if you have been given an antiseptic wash, make sure that you have a bath or shower before going to hospital to minimise the risk of infection
- stop eating and drinking as instructed
- carefully follow instructions about taking your medication ahead of surgery
- avoid alcohol or any recreational drugs
- if you smoke or vape, stop in the days before surgery.

Day of the surgery

On the day of surgery, you should:

- arrive at your scheduled time
- bring your packed bag and your medications
- you can arrive with a carer or friend; if your surgery is a day case, they will be told where they can wait or they will be called when your surgery is finished and you are ready to go home
- ask the person driving you to hospital to allow plenty of time to find a car parking space.

In hospital, you'll be reviewed by the admission nurse, surgeon and anaesthetist, who will carry out routine checks, explain what is going to happen and get your consent for the procedure. This is another opportunity to ask any questions that you might have.

More information on what to expect when having surgery and anaesthesia is available here: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/leaflet-video-resources**.

Going home and recovery

Your recovery starts immediately after your operation when you are still in the hospital. For many surgical procedures there is now no need to rest in bed for a long time after surgery. You will be encouraged to eat, drink and move as soon as you are able to. This will help you to recover quicker and reduce the risk of complications.

Roger's story: 'After my op I was on the HDU for a day and then back to the ward. I was in hospital longer than expected, because my wound did not heal well at first, but I had no serious complications. The physio at the hospital gave me breathing exercises and encouraged me to walk around the ward to keep active and speed up my recovery.'

Before you leave the hospital, your nurse will give you written information about what to expect during your recovery at home, how to look after your surgical wounds and how to manage any pain that you might experience. This will also include anything to look out for and a number to call if you are worried. You may also speak to the surgeon before leaving hospital. They will let you know how the surgery went and any follow-ups that might be needed.

Tips to keep you motivated while recovering at home

Depending on what surgery you are having, recovery may take many weeks. Don't worry if some days go better than others. This is normal.

Below are some ideas to keep track of your recovery:

- it can be useful to keep a recovery diary which you can continue after you go home
- try and get into a routine and get up in the morning at a regular time
- a list of daily goals can give structure to your day and help monitor your progress
- visits and phone calls from family and friends can cheer you up and encourage you to reach your goals.

Many people decide to keep up with the good lifestyle habits that they have learnt along their surgical journey long after they have recovered.

Roger's story: 'Three months after my op I'm still feeling the benefits of the changes I have made. I don't need my inhaler as often as I used to and I find it easier to walk up the stairs. I still love my walks, my weight keeps dropping and I feel much more optimistic about the future.'

'This is a useful resource for patients which we can use in our clinical practice, to support patients in their pathway through surgery.'

Dr Adrian Hayter, Medical Director, Royal College of General Practitioners

Additional resources

Royal College of Anaesthetists

- Information for patients on the different types of anaesthetics and what to expect: www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/leaflets-video-resources.
- Information for carers of people having an operation with anaesthesia: www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/caring-recovering-from-ga.
- Information on the risks associated with anaesthetics: www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risks.

Centre for Perioperative Care

- Resources for patients: https://bit.ly/3AaQFOL.

Royal College of Surgeons of England

- Information for patients on having surgery: http://bit.ly/2NdA1SH.

Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

- Resources and information for patients, families and carers: https://bit.ly/RCSEd-Resources.

Preparing for surgery checklist

This checklist has been designed to help you prepare for surgery. It shows all the things you can do in the months, weeks and days ahead of surgery to help you get the best possible outcomes.

WHEN	WHAT
Months before surgery	☐ Get active: 30 mins, 4–5 times/week. Adjust if you need to. ☐ Eat well: whole foods, fruit and veg, lean protein. ☐ Manage your weight if you live with obesity or being overweight. ☐ Cut back alcohol. ☐ Quit smoking/vaping. ☐ Try to improve your sleep if you are a poor sleeper. ☐ Make sure medical conditions are under control – visit your GP. ☐ Visit the dentist to make sure teeth and gums are in good condition. ☐ Look after your mental health – seek help if you are very anxious about surgery.
Weeks before surgery	☐ Attend preop assessment; bring all medications. ☐ Bring a list of questions or any concerns you want to discuss. ☐ Arrange support for travel and home care. ☐ Stock up on essentials and prepare meals. ☐ Keep up healthy habits.
Day before surgery	☐ Pack hospital bag. ☐ Follow instructions for eating, drinking, and medications. ☐ Shower with antiseptic wash if advised. ☐ Avoid alcohol, smoking, vaping. ☐ Notify hospital if unwell.
Day of surgery	☐ Arrive on time with bag and medications. ☐ Expect checks by nurse, surgeon, anaesthetist. ☐ Ask any last minute questions.
After surgery	☐ Start moving, eating, and drinking as soon as advised. ☐ Follow wound care and pain management instructions. ☐ Keep a recovery diary and set daily goals. ☐ Keep up healthy habits!

Disclaimer

We try very hard to keep the information in this leaflet accurate and up to date, but we cannot guarantee this. We don't expect this general information to cover all the questions that you might have or to deal with everything that might be important to you. You should discuss your choices and any worries that you have with your medical team, using this leaflet as a guide. This leaflet on its own should not be treated as advice. It cannot be used for any commercial or business purpose. For full details, please see our website: www.coa.ac.uk/patientinfo/resources#disclaimer.

Information for healthcare professionals on printing this leaflet

Please consider the visual impairments of patients when printing or photocopying this leaflet. Photocopies of photocopies are discouraged because these tend to be low-quality prints and can be very difficult for patients to read. Please also make sure that you use the latest version of this leaflet, which is available on the RCoA website.

Tell us what you think

We welcome suggestions to improve this leaflet. If you're a patient or carer, we'd love to hear from you. Please complete this short survey at: www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/fitterbettersooner#tell-us or you can scan the QR code below with your mobile.

If you have any general comments, please email them to: patientinformation@rcoa.ac.uk.

Your feedback helps us understand who is using our information, how useful it is and how our resources have helped you. Thank you.

rcoa.ac.uk

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This leaflet will be reviewed within three years of the date of publication.

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