Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Anxiety Before Surgery

This information explains how to manage anxiety before surgery.

About anxiety before surgery

It's common to feel nervous and anxious before surgery. There are many reasons you may feel nervous before surgery. Some examples include:

- **Fear of the unknown.** You may feel nervous because you don't know exactly what surgery or recovery will be like.
- **Worry about whether the surgery will work.** You may wonder if the surgery will remove the cancer or help you feel better.
- **Fear of pain or discomfort.** You may be worried that surgery or recovery will hurt or be uncomfortable.
- **Concerns about anesthesia** (medicine to make you sleep during surgery). You may feel nervous about how anesthesia will make you feel.
- **Worry about body changes.** Some surgeries can change how your body looks or works. This can make you feel nervous about how your body may be different after surgery.
- **Fear that the cancer may get worse.** You may worry the cancer could spread or come back.
- **Emotional stress.** Thinking about surgery and cancer can bring up many feelings, such as fear, sadness, or anger. All these emotions can feel overwhelming.
- **Concerns about going back to work.** You may worry about how long your recovery will take, when you'll be able to return to work, or whether you'll be able to do your job the same way as before. You may also have concerns

about finances or taking time away from work.

- **Worry about loved ones.** You may be thinking about how your surgery or recovery may affect your loved ones.
- **Thoughts about past medical experiences.** If you had a bad medical experience, you may be nervous about having the same experience again.

Remember, feeling nervous before surgery is normal. Your care team is here to support you and help you feel as prepared as possible.

What to expect before, during, and after surgery

Knowing what to expect can help ease some of your anxiety. Here is a general overview of what will happen before, during, and after surgery. No surgery is the same. Talk with your care team about what you can expect for your surgery.

Before surgery

Getting ready for surgery

Your care team will give you clear instructions about how to get ready for surgery. This will include:

- When to stop eating and drinking.
- When to stop taking certain medicines.
- What you can do before surgery to help with your recovery.

You can also visit www.msk.org/pe to search for educational resources related to your surgery.

Presurgical testing (PST)

You may have a pre-surgery appointment to go over your health history, allergies, and other details.

You may have blood tests, imaging scans (X-rays or CT scans), or other tests to make sure you're ready for surgery.

Questions and concerns

It's normal to have questions about surgery. Ask your care team about anything that worries you, such as pain, anesthesia, or your recovery. It can help to write down your questions so you don't forget to ask them.

Getting emotionally ready

It's common to feel anxious. You are not alone, and there are ways to cope. Your care team can offer strategies and support, such as counseling or relaxation exercises, to help manage these feelings. You can also contact any of the services in this resource for help.

The day of surgery

When you get to the hospital, you'll meet with your surgeon, nurse, and physician assistant. You'll also meet with an anesthesiologist (a-nes-THEE-zee-AH-loh-jist), a doctor with special training in medicine to make you drowsy or sleep during your surgery. The staff will ask you questions to review your health information.

One guest can stay with you until you're called into surgery. Go to www.msk.org/visit for the most up-to-date visitor information and instructions. We sometimes update our visitor policy to keep you safe and healthy.

During surgery

The length of your surgery depends on the surgery you're having. Your care team will tell you about how long your surgery may take. Your care team will watch your vital signs, such as your heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen levels. This helps keep you safe.

After you wake up, your guest can come sit with you.

After surgery

When you wake up after surgery:

- You may feel sleepy or confused from the anesthesia. This is normal. It will get better about an hour after your surgery.

- You may feel nauseous (like you're going to throw up) from the anesthesia. Your care team will give you medicine to help manage this.
- You may have some pain, but medicine will help control it. Be sure to tell your care team how you feel so they can help.

How long you stay in the recovery room depends on your surgery and how you feel after waking up.

Before you leave the hospital

Your nurse will give you clear instructions before you leave the hospital. They'll tell you:

- What to expect in the days after your surgery.
- How to care for yourself at home.
- How to take your medicine.
- When to schedule your follow-up visits.

It's normal to have many feelings after surgery, such as relief or worry. Sharing your feelings with a loved one, joining a support group, or talking with a counselor may help. Your care team can help connect you to support services at MSK.

How to manage anxiety before surgery, during, and after surgery

It's important to notice and manage anxiety before surgery. Doing this can help lower stress, make you feel better overall, and help with your recovery. It can also help you feel more in control. This can help you feel better physically and emotionally.

Here are some ways you can manage your anxiety:

Talk with your care team. Make sure to talk with your care team about how you're feeling. They can help ease any concerns you have and get you the support you need before, during, and after surgery.

Stay in touch with your family and friends. Talk with your loved ones about the surgery you're going to have. Tell them how you feel about it. Think about what support you may need while you recover and talk with them about how they can help.

It's important to make a support system for yourself during your cancer treatment. Sharing your feelings with people who support you can help ease your mind.

Get mental and emotional support. MSK has mental health experts, such as counselors and social workers, who can help you with your anxiety. We also have chaplains (spiritual counselors) who can listen, pray, and be a comforting presence.

Join a support group. You may find it comforting to talk with other people going through cancer treatment. You can learn how others manage their anxiety and remember that you're not alone.

- To learn about MSK's support groups, visit www.msk.org/counseling or call our Counseling Center at 646-888-0200.
- We also offer online support groups through our Virtual Programs. Visit www.msk.org/vp for more information.

Learn relaxation exercises. Relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing, stretching, and meditation, can help you manage anxiety. These exercises can help you feel relaxed and calm.

To learn more about relaxation exercises:

- Listen to and follow along with *Breathing Exercises to Prepare for Procedures* (www.msk.org/videos/breathing-exercises-prepare-procedures). This meditation will help you focus on your breathing to feel calm before your surgery.
- Read *Integrative Medicine Therapies and Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/integrative-therapies) to learn about the therapies MSK's Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service offers. These therapies can

help you build your coping skills and help with anxiety.

- Visit www.msk.org/meditation to find meditations led by our Integrative Medicine and Wellness providers.

Do relaxation exercises on the day of your surgery. On the morning of your surgery, try doing relaxation exercises, such as taking deep breaths, stretching, or meditating. These exercises can help lower stress and help you feel more prepared for surgery.

Try to do relaxing activities in your hospital room before your surgery . Each room has a TV, so you can watch your favorite show.

There are free apps you can download on your phone that offer guided meditations, breathing exercises, and calming music. Some examples are:

- Calm
- Headspace
- Insight Timer
- Simple Habit

You can also make your own playlist with relaxing music using apps like Apple Music, Spotify, Pandora, or YouTube Music. Listening to music you enjoy can help you feel calmer and more comfortable.

Try mindfulness meditation

Meditation is a way to relax your body and calm your mind. It can help lower stress and help you stay focused on the present moment.

Follow these steps to get started:

1. **Find a comfortable place to sit**.
   Sit in a quiet spot with your back straight. This can be in a chair or on the floor. Close your eyes.
2. **Focus on your breathing**.
   Take slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and breathe out

through your mouth. Pay attention to each breath.

3. **Notice your body.**
   Slowly think about each part of your body from head to toe. Notice if anything feels tight or tense. Try to relax it.
4. **Notice your thoughts.**
   If thoughts come into your mind, that's OK. Just notice them, then bring your focus back to your breathing.
5. **Be kind to yourself.**
   If you feel worried or anxious, remind yourself, "It's OK to feel this way. I'm here to help myself."
6. **Expand your awareness.**
   Start to notice the sounds around you. Stay in the present moment.
7. **End slowly.**
   When you're ready, take a few deep breaths. Then, gently open your eyes and bring your focus back to the room.

Try to practice mindfulness during your daily activities, even if it's only for a few minutes at a time. For example, you can focus on your breathing while sitting quietly. Or, you can pay attention to how your body feels while walking. You can notice the taste of your food while eating. Small moments like these can help you feel calmer and more present.

Support services

We offer many resources to help you and your loved ones manage anxiety around surgery. No matter how you're feeling, we're here to support you and have resources that can help.

Counseling Center
646-888-0200
www.msk.org/counseling
Many people find that counseling helps them. Our Counseling Center offers counseling for individuals, couples, families, and groups. We can also prescribe medicine to help if you feel anxious or depressed. Ask a member of your care

team for a referral or call the number above to make an appointment.

Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service

www.msk.org/integrativemedicine

Our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service offers many services to complement (go along with) traditional medical care. For example, we offer acupuncture, aromatherapy, music therapy, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. Call 646-449-1010 to make an appointment for these services.

You can also schedule a consultation with a healthcare provider in the Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service. They'll work with you to make a plan for creating a healthy lifestyle and managing side effects. Call 646-608-8550 to make an appointment for a consultation.

Online classes through Greatly Health

MSK's Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service is collaborating with Greatly Health to offer a new online mind-body and exercise experience. You can meet with an integrative medicine expert to create a personalized plan for you. They will recommend online classes for you to take from the comfort of your home. Examples of classes include gentle yoga and morning meditation. Visit www.greatlyhealth.com to sign up and learn more.

MSK's mind-body workshops

MSK offers short, online workshops for people with cancer, caregivers, and survivors. Mind-body workshops can help you get ready for surgery, stay active during treatment, and learn natural ways to manage side effects. They also give you a chance to connect with other people affected by cancer. Many people feel more confident and supported after joining a workshop.

Each workshop is about 75 minutes. There is a fee to attend. To see a list of workshops and their prices, visit www.msk.org/cancer-care/diagnosis-treatment/symptom-management/integrative-medicine/therapies/workshops

Tell a member of your care team if you're interested in one of these workshops. They can enter a referral to start your registration.

Social Work
212-639-7020
www.msk.org/socialwork
Social workers help patients, families, and friends deal with common issues for people who have cancer. They provide individual counseling and support groups throughout your treatment. They can help you communicate with children and other family members.

Our social workers can also help refer you to community agencies and programs. If you're having trouble paying your bills, they also have information about financial resources. Call the number above to learn more.

Spiritual Care
212-639-5982
Our chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, and pray. They can contact community clergy or faith groups, or simply be a comforting companion and a spiritual presence. Anyone can ask for spiritual support. You do not have to have a religious affiliation (connection to a religion).

MSK's interfaith chapel is near Memorial Hospital's main lobby. It's open 24 hours a day. If you have an emergency, call 212-639-2000. Ask for the chaplain on call.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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