

What is patient awareness under general anesthesia?

Awareness under general anesthesia is a rare condition that occurs when surgical patients can recall their surroundings or an event - sometimes even pain - related to their surgery while they were under general anesthesia.

When using other kinds of anesthesia, such as local, sedation or regional anesthesia, it is expected that patients will have some recollection of their procedure.

Studies are not conclusive on the frequency of awareness under general anesthesia, but even one case is important to anesthesiologists, who recognize that this can be a distressing or traumatic experience for the patient.

When awareness during general anesthesia does occur, it is usually just prior to the anesthetic completely taking effect or as the patient is emerging from anesthesia. In very few instances, it may occur during the surgery itself. Despite the rarity of awareness, members of the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) want you to know about this possibility. We are studying this issue and are evaluating various technologies and techniques to decrease the likelihood of this occurring.

In some high risk surgeries such as trauma, cardiac surgery and emergency cesarean delivery, or in situations involving patients whose condition is unstable, using a deep anesthetic may not be in the best interest of the patient and awareness may not be completely unavoidable. While the safety of anesthesia has increased markedly over the last 20 years, people may react differently to the same level or type of anesthesia. Sometimes medications can mask important signs that anesthesia professionals monitor to help determine the depth of anesthesia. In other rare instances, technical failure or human error may contribute to unexpected episodes of awareness. Our ultimate goal as highly trained anesthesia professionals is always to protect the life of the patient and to make the patient as comfortable as possible.

Before surgery, patients should meet with their anesthesiologist to discuss anesthesia options. Should there be concerns regarding awareness, this is an ideal time to express them and ask questions. Patients should share with their anesthesiologist any problems they may have experienced with previous anesthetics and also discuss any prescription and over the counter medications they are taking.

We will guide you safely through your surgery by relying on our clinical experience, training and judgment combined with proven technology.

(Excerpt from the "Anesthesia and You" section of the ASA Web site
www.asahq.org/patientEducation/anesandyou.htm)

