

CovidSurg | 2020  
South Africa

## COVID-19 Having an operation during the pandemic



NIHR Global Health Research Unit on  
**Global Surgery**

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

You or a loved one may be planning or waiting for an operation. We understand this is a stressful time and you will have lots of questions.

This booklet has been created to help patients and their families understand the risks of having an operation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explain how we will care for you during the pandemic and how we can work together to keep you safe.

*We are very grateful to the UK Patient Advisory Group who helped create this booklet. It has been adapted by the South African clinical team.*



*For more information, please visit:  
<http://nihrglobalsurgery.org/surgeryduringcovid>*

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# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

## What is being done to protect surgical patients?

Healthcare services across the world are working hard to protect patients who require surgery during the pandemic from COVID-19 before or after their operation.

The perioperative team, including surgeons, anaesthetists and researchers have been gathering the most up-to-date information about managing patients who need an operation during the pandemic and contract the virus before or after surgery. This will help make decisions based on actual data.

**Most patients having surgery during the pandemic will not contract COVID-19 around the time of their operation.**

## What are the risks if I develop COVID-19 after my operation?



Research shows that breathing complications can be more severe for adult patients who contract the virus after an operation, compared to those who do not contract the virus. There is also evidence of a higher death rate among these patients.

Patients who have other underlying health problems are also at increased risk if they develop COVID-19. That is why it is so important we work together to protect surgical patients.

## How can I stay safe?

If you or a family member are preparing to undergo surgery during the COVID-19 pandemic, your perioperative team will weigh the urgency of the operation against the potential risks of COVID-19 infection. They will work hard to make your care as safe as possible.

# PLANNING FOR SURGERY

## When will my operation take place?

Patients are being prioritised to have their operation as soon as is safely possible. The timing of this will take into account resources, including ward and intensive care beds, theatre and human resource availability, and local levels of COVID-19. You may be offered an operation in the evening or over the weekend as care is resumed to reduce long waiting lists.



Patient safety prioritisation



Evening or weekend operation time



Reducing waiting lists

## Where will my operation take place?

Operations will take place in environments designed to ensure patient safety. Every effort will be made to separate COVID-19 contaminated areas from other wards and operating theatres, to provide as safe an environment as possible.



Planned operations



Carefully designed safe environment

## How can I prepare for my operation?

You may be asked to:

- self-isolate for a period of time before your operation. This is important and could be for up to 14 days.
- be screened for SARS-CoV-2 symptoms or tested for infection before your operation.

Where possible, patients who test positive for the virus will usually need to have their operation delayed. Please talk to your surgeon about the specific risks of your operation and any other measures you can take to prepare.



Pre-operative self isolation



Pre-operative testing for SARS-CoV-2



Tested positive for the virus



Operation delayed

# STAYING SAFE DURING AND AFTER SURGERY

## What are staff doing to keep me safe during and after surgery?

- Hospital teams will use PPE (personal protective equipment) to protect you and themselves. This is specialised protective clothing that provides a barrier between the virus and the patient/hospital team member. It may include goggles, visors and masks.
- The operation and/or your anaesthetic may be adapted to minimise operating time or decrease staff exposure to potentially contaminated aerosols or droplets. This will not compromise your care.
- Any modifications to standard care due to COVID-19 will be discussed with you.
- Hospitals may restrict visitors.



Fully equipped  
with PPE



Adapted procedures  
to reduce exposure  
time



Adjusted care  
discussed with you

If you develop COVID-19 after your operation, the hospital team will consider your increased risks due to the recent surgery and provide supportive care to promote recovery from both the operation and any infection.

**Remember: most patients having surgery during the pandemic will not contract COVID-19 around the time of their operation.**

# PLANNING FOR SURGERY

How can I help myself stay safe during and after my operation?

- Adhere to strict hygiene measures.
- Self-isolation before your operation will also help protect the perioperative team.
- Make use of masks where possible.
- Visitors may be restricted in hospital and after you go home.
- You may be asked to self-isolate at home after your surgery.
- Virtual clinics may be used where physical follow-up visits can be avoided.



Your surgical team will only discharge you from hospital when to do so. They will advise you on matters related to your oper recovery such as how to care for any wounds, pain medication, exercise.

If you have questions about your recovery, please ask your local team.

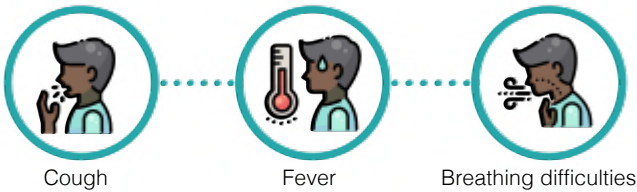
Hospital stays during the pandemic, and recovery at home, can be lonely. Remember to bring books, tablets or cell phones that will help you pass the time in hospital and keep you in contact with family members. It is a good idea to ask family, friends or neighbours for help with shopping and errands when you are self-isolating, before or after your surgery.

# EMERGENCY SURGERY

## What if I need an emergency operation?

Some patients will need an operation within hours or days of presenting to hospital. The pandemic should not stop patients from seeking medical help. **If you are unwell you should not delay. Surgical teams are ready to care for you.**

Some patients may have come into contact with a person with COVID-19 before arrival to hospital. This exposure may cause COVID-19 symptoms around the time of their operation.



Published research shows that adults with COVID-19 infection who also undergo an operation are particularly vulnerable as the body tries to deal with both surgery and COVID-19.

## What if I have COVID-19 and an operation?

Adult patients who are infected with the virus around the time of operation are at much higher risk of having severe COVID-19 symptoms.

There is approximately 50% risk of breathing difficulties in these patients and 1 in 4 risk of death.

Risk of breathing difficulties ~50%



Risk of death ~25%



Due to these very high risks, extra care is taken to protect surgical patients and to support patients who contract the virus.



# CANCELLATIONS AND DELAYS TO CARE

## Why was my operation cancelled?

International surgical bodies have advised against non-urgent major surgical interventions whilst in the escalation and surge phases of the pandemic.

### Operations are cancelled for many reasons including:

- › to minimise the risk of in-hospital infection with COVID-19 and potential complications for patients.
- › to release anaesthetists, theatre staff and surgeons for redeployment to support other critical areas of the hospital.
- › to release PPE, ventilators and ward or critical care beds to be used for emergency care of COVID-19-infected patients.

## How are waiting lists affected?



Globally, **28 million operations** have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



In South Africa we anticipate that **over 150,000** patients will have their operation postponed due to the pandemic.

These estimates are based on a global study of cancellations in the first 12 weeks of COVID-19.

## How is it now possible to have surgery?

Significant re-organisation is taking place to maximise the operations that can safely take place during the pandemic. Depending on the pandemic phase in your area, patients are being prioritised to have treatment as soon as is safely possible.

# KEY TERMS

## COVID-19 AND SARS-CoV-2

COVID-19 is the name of the disease in this pandemic. It is caused by a virus known as SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2). It is mostly spread by droplets from the nose or mouth of an infected person. Most patients with COVID-19 experience mild or moderate symptoms that do not need hospital care. A minority of patients have more severe symptoms, may be admitted to hospital or require breathing and other organ support.

## COVID-19 TREATMENT

Currently no treatments exist to specifically treat the virus so supportive management or care is the main treatment strategy. Prevention therefore, is key, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

## COVID-19 SCREENING

You will be asked questions about symptoms of infection with COVID-19. The answers to these questions are really important to protect you, other patients and staff.

## COVID-19 TESTING

This involves a mouth and/or nose swab to see if you are infected with the virus. This may be done even if you have no symptoms.

## SELF-ISOLATION

If you are at higher risk of being seriously affected by coronavirus infection, for example if you are awaiting an operation, you may be asked to self-isolate before coming to hospital, that means staying at home and not leaving for any reason though you may arrange home deliveries of food and medicine. You should also self-isolate if you or anyone you live with has symptoms of COVID-19.

## SOCIAL DISTANCING

This describes strategies that reduce close physical contact between people who may be infected and others who are susceptible during a disease outbreak.





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