Local anaesthesia for your eye operation

Translations are available for this leaflet: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/translations**.

This leaflet explains what to expect when you have an eye operation under local anaesthetic. It has been written by anaesthetists, patients and patient representatives, working together.

Contents

This leaflet explains:

- what a local anaesthetic is
- the different types of local anaesthetics for common eye operations
- risks and shared decision-making
- how to prepare for an eye operation
- what to expect during an eye operation
- what to expect after an eye operation.

Local anaesthetic for an eye operation

A local anaesthetic for an eye operation is a medicine that numbs your eye and the area around it so that you do not feel pain during the operation. With a local anaesthetic, you stay awake during the operation. The vast majority of eye operations can be done safely with a local anaesthetic.

As well as keeping you pain free during the operation, a local anaesthetic has other advantages:

- it provides pain relief for several hours after the operation.
- it is safer than a general anaesthetic, especially if you have existing medical conditions or are elderly.
- it enables you to recover more quickly, so that you can go home sooner after the operation.
- it allows you to start eating and drinking soon after the operation. This is important for your recovery.

Local anaesthetic for eye surgery may be given as eyedrops, an injection around the eye or both. If you need an injection, numbing drops are given first. The injection may sting for a short time.

Common eye operations and anaesthetic options

Below is a table describing the most common types of eye surgery and the anaesthetic options. Cataract, retinal, glaucoma and laser procedures are commonly performed under local anaesthetic, although longer or more complex operations may require sedation or general anaesthesia.

For more information about sedation, please see our Sedation explained leaflet, which can be found on the RCoA website: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/sedation-explained**.

For more information about general anaesthesia, please see our You and your anaesthetic leaflet, which can be found on the RCoA website: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/youranaesthetic**.

Your healthcare team will discuss with you which option they think is best for you, based on the type of surgery that you need and your general health.

Eye operation	What it is for	Anaesthetic options
Cataract surgery	Removing a cloudy lens in your eye and replacing it with an artificial lens.	Numbing eyedrops, sometimes with a small injection of local anaesthetic into the front of the eye. An injection around the eye may be used if the eye needs to remain still.
Retinal surgery	Treating a problem at the back of the eye, such as a detached retina (the retina is a thin, light-sensitive layer at the back of your eye that helps you see).	Usually an injection of local anaesthetic around the eye to numb it and stop it moving Some operations require a general anaesthetic.
Glaucoma surgery	Helping fluid drain from the eye to reduce pressure and protect your sight (glaucoma is damage to the nerve at the back of the eye, often caused by increased pressure inside the eye).	Numbing eyedrops, often with an injection around or into the eye. A general anaesthetic may be needed for some operations.
Corneal surgery	Treating or replacing the clear layer at the front of the eye.	Numbing eyedrops, sometimes with an injection around or into the eye. Some operations require a general anaesthetic.
Eyelid surgery	Treating a problem with the eyelid or the area around the eye.	Usually an injection of local anaesthetic into the eyelid or the area around it.
Laser eye treatment	Treating a problem inside the eye or at the back of the eye.	Usually numbing eye drops, sometimes with local anaesthetic injection.

Can anyone have a local anaesthetic for an eye operation?

The vast majority of patients can have a local anaesthetic for their eye operation. However, you will need to be able to:

- lie still for the duration of the operation
- follow simple instructions.

For some patients, a local anaesthetic may not be the best option, for example:

- if they are allergic to local anaesthetic drugs
- if they find it difficult or impossible to keep still, for example, because of a medical condition
- if they find it difficult to communicate, for example, because of hearing difficulties or language barriers
- if they have severe claustrophobia (fear of confined spaces).

Can I have a general anaesthetic instead of a local anaesthetic?

If you are worried about having a local anaesthetic or staying awake during the operation, speak to your healthcare team as early as possible.

They can arrange an assessment to decide whether general anaesthesia is the appropriate option. There may be medical or surgical reasons why a local anaesthetic is the safer and better option for you. Please see the sections below on risk and shared decision-making.

General anaesthesia for eye surgery is not available at every hospital. If you and your healthcare team agree that a general anaesthetic is the best option for you, you may need to be referred to another hospital or clinic.

Risks and local anaesthesia for eye surgery

Local anaesthesia for eye surgery is usually very safe. The side effects are generally mild and do not last long. Your individual risks will depend on your general health, the type of operation and how the local anaesthetic is given. Your healthcare team will discuss the benefits and risks of the options that are suitable for you, as well as your preferences. Together, you will decide which option is best for you.

For more information about the risks associated with anaesthesia, please visit: www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risks.

Additional risks associated with local anaesthesia for eye surgery

If your local anaesthetic is given by injection, there are some additional risks, which may include the below.

- Bruising or redness around the eye. You may develop a black eye or the white part of your eye may look red. This is more likely if you bruise easily or take blood-thinning medicines. It usually improves without treatment.
- Damage to the eye, blood vessels or eye muscles. This may affect your sight or cause double vision.
- Permanent damage to your sight or permanent double vision.

- A severe allergic reaction or the local anaesthetic spreading to other parts of your body. This can affect your breathing, heart or brain and will need immediate treatment.
- An extremely rare risk is death caused by the local anaesthetic.

Your healthcare team will monitor you and can treat any problems that occur.

Shared decision-making

Shared decision-making ensures that individuals are supported to make decisions that are right for them. It is a collaborative process through which a clinician supports a patient to reach a decision about their treatment.

The conversation brings together:

- the clinician's expertise, such as treatment options, evidence, risks and benefits
- what the patient knows best: their preferences, personal circumstances, goals, values and beliefs.

Find out more 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 your anaesthetist or preoperative assessment staff:

- 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**).

Questions you might like to ask

If you have questions about your anaesthetic, write them down (you can use the examples below and add your own in the space below). If you want to speak to an anaesthetist or eye surgeon before the day of your operation, contact the preoperative assessment team who may be able to arrange for you to speak to an anaesthetist on the phone or to see them in a clinic.

- **What type of local anaesthetic would be best for me and why?**
- **Do I have any special risks?**
- **When can I go home?**

How will I be assessed before the operation?

Before your operation, a member of the healthcare team will ask about:

- your general health and any medical conditions that you have
- the medicines that you take and any allergies that you have; it may help to have an up-to-date list of your medicines available; your GP surgery or pharmacy can help
- any previous problems with local or general anaesthetics
- whether you can lie reasonably flat and still for the operation
- whether you may need extra support to communicate with the theatre team.

You may be assessed in person, by telephone or by completing a questionnaire. Most people having eye surgery under local anaesthetic do not need special tests. If you have certain health conditions or need sedation or a general anaesthetic, you may need further assessment.

Preparing for your operation

Your hospital will give you instructions about how to prepare for your operation. It is important to follow these carefully.

If you are having local anaesthesia without sedation, you can usually eat and drink as normal. If you are having sedation or a general anaesthetic, you will be told when to stop eating and drinking.

Your healthcare team will tell you which medicines to take before your operation. Do not stop taking any medicines, including blood-thinning medicines, unless your healthcare team tells you to.

Your healthcare team will tell you whether you need help when you go home after the operation. If possible, arrange this in advance with family or friends.

On the day of your operation:

- take your medicines as instructed
- do not wear eye make-up
- bring any glasses, hearing aids or other items that help you communicate.

Tell the hospital if you become unwell before your operation or develop a cough, cold or eye infection.

What to expect during an eye operation with a local anaesthetic

What happens when I arrive for my operation?

A member of the healthcare team will welcome you and check your identity, what operation you are having and which eye will be treated. You will meet your surgeon and have an opportunity to ask any questions. You may be asked to wear a theatre gown.

When you go into the operating theatre, you will be helped into a comfortable position, usually lying on your back. Tell the healthcare team if you have neck or back pain or you find it difficult to lie flat. They will help you find a comfortable position and may use cushions or pillows to support you. Tell them before the operation starts if you feel uncomfortable once you are in position.

The team may attach monitoring equipment, such as a blood pressure cuff and a clip on your finger to measure your pulse and the oxygen level in your blood. You may also have stickers placed on your chest to monitor your heartbeat.

The team will clean the area around your eye and give you the local anaesthetic. Your face will be covered with a sterile sheet, but you will still be able to breathe normally. For most procedures, your head will rest on a specially shaped cushion or head rest to help keep it still during the operation.

Who will give the anaesthetic?

Your local anaesthetic will be given by a qualified healthcare professional. This may be your surgeon, an anaesthetist or another member of the healthcare team, depending on the type of operation that you are having. The person giving the local anaesthetic may not be the person carrying out your operation.

How will I know that the local anaesthetic is working?

If you have an injection, your healthcare professional may ask you to move your eye to check that the local anaesthetic is working. You may not be able to move your eye and your eyelid may droop. This is normal and usually wears off within a few hours.

Your forehead, cheek or upper jaw may also feel numb. This usually improves within a few hours, but it can sometimes last until the next day.

Numbing eyedrops work very quickly. You will still be able to move your eye and feel sensations around your eyelids. You may notice the small clip used to keep your eyelids open, but this should not be painful.

What will I feel when the local anaesthetic is given?

Some eye operations only need numbing eyedrops. If you need an injection, you may feel some stinging, pressure or discomfort while it is given. This usually lasts only a short time.

What will I feel during the operation?

Once the local anaesthetic is working, you should not feel pain. You may feel touch or pressure during the operation, especially if numbing eyedrops have been used. Tell the healthcare team straight away if you feel any pain or discomfort. They can give you more local anaesthetic if needed.

Will I see and hear anything during the operation?

You may see bright lights, colours or movement during the operation or you may not see anything. You will not usually be able to see what the surgeon is doing.

You will hear the theatre team talking and may hear sounds from the equipment. The team will speak to you directly if they need you to do anything.

If you have an injection around your eye, your vision may be blurred or you may have double vision until the local anaesthetic has fully worn off. This usually improves within a few hours but may last until the next day.

Can I wear my hearing aid during the operation?

You will usually need to remove the hearing aid on the same side as the eye being operated on. This is because water may enter your ear and affect the hearing aid. You can usually wear a hearing aid in your other ear.

Can I wear my dentures during the operation?

You can leave your dentures in place unless you are having deep sedation with your local anaesthetic, in which case the healthcare team might ask you to remove them.

What if I need to move, cough or speak?

You will need to keep your head as still as possible during the operation. If you need to cough, clear your throat, scratch your nose, adjust your position or speak, you should let the team know first. They can pause the operation so that you can do this safely.

The team will tell you how to alert them. For example, you may be asked to raise your hand or press a call button. The surgeon may also ask you to keep very still during certain parts of the operation.

Try not to speak unless you need to tell the team something, because talking can move your head. Do not touch your face or the area around your eye, because this could increase the risk of infection.

What happens after the operation?

After your operation, you will be taken to a recovery area or back to the day surgery unit. The healthcare team will check that you are recovering well and that you are comfortable. Your eye may be covered with a pad or protective shield.

After some eye operations, you may need to lie flat or keep your head in a particular position to help your eye heal. For some eye operations, a gas bubble is placed inside the eye to help it heal. Your healthcare team will explain any precautions you need to take.

When can I go home?

Most people can go home soon after an eye operation under local anaesthesia. How soon you can leave will depend on the operation that you have had and how well you recover.

If you have had sedation, a responsible adult must take you home and follow the instructions given by the hospital.

Before you leave, the eye team will give you written information about:

- any medicines or eyedrops that you need to use
- how to care for your eye
- activities that you should avoid
- any follow-up appointments
- whom to contact if you have concerns.

Will I be in pain?

You may have some discomfort when the local anaesthetic wears off. Pain-relieving medicines, such as paracetamol, are usually enough. Ask your healthcare team which pain relief is suitable for you.

How should I care for my eye?

Follow the instructions given to you by the eye team. You may be advised to:

- avoid rubbing or touching your eye
- protect your eye from dust, dirt and windy weather
- avoid heavy lifting, strenuous exercise and swimming for a period of time
- wait before wearing contact lenses again.

When should I ask for medical help?

Contact the healthcare team urgently if:

- your sight gets worse
- your eye becomes very painful
- redness or swelling is getting worse
- you have a discharge from your eye
- you have any other concerns that are not covered in the information given to you by the hospital.

If you cannot contact the healthcare team, contact NHS 111 for advice.

Where can I get further information?

Your hospital will give you information about your operation and recovery.

You can find more information about eye conditions and treatment from:

- the NHS: **www.nhs.uk**
- the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB): **www.rnib.org.uk/your-eyes**
- the Royal College of Ophthalmologists: **www.rcophth.ac.uk/patients-public**.

For general information about anaesthesia, risk and how to prepare for surgery, please see the RCoA website:

- RCoA information leaflets and video resources: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/leaflets-video-resources**
- Anaesthesia and risk: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risk-leaflets**
- Fitter Better Sooner – preparing for surgery: **www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/fitterbettersooner**.

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 you might have or to deal with everything that might be important to you. You should discuss your choices and any worries 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.rcoa.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: **rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/la-eye-operation#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.

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

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