

When You Need Surgery

Walking out of a doctor's office with a recommendation for surgery can be scary because of many unknowns about what is involved, what steps will need to be taken, and what the outcome will be. Millions of Americans have surgery each year, and by being an assertive partner with your doctors and medical professionals, you can help ensure that you get sound information and assistance to help you receive the best treatment options available and make the right decisions.

Most surgeries are not emergencies and you have time to find out as much as possible, think it over, and review other options. Some questions to ask your surgeon include:

- What surgery is recommended, and why do I need surgery?
- Can another treatment be tried instead of surgery?
- What if I don't have the surgery?
- How will the surgery affect my health and lifestyle, and will there be activities I won't be able to do after surgery?
- How long will it take to recover?
- How much experience has the surgeon had doing this kind of surgery?
- Where will the surgery be done?
- What kind of anesthesia will be used? Are there side effects and risks of having anesthesia?

You may wish to get a second opinion. If you need emergency surgery, you cannot wait for a second opinion, but for non-emergencies, getting a second opinion can help you make an informed decision. Deciding to get a second opinion makes many people uneasy. However, getting a second opinion is a common medical practice and most doctors encourage it. You can gain information from a second opinion, and will have better information to weigh your options, and knowledge about any non-surgical treatments that may be available. If you get a second opinion, have your medical records sent to the second doctor. Ask the second doctor the same questions about the benefits and risks of surgery. Take a list of questions with you. Write down the answers. Take your spouse or family member with you. Your Health Plan covers second opinions.

As a patient, you need to be an involved member of your healthcare team. Keep a complete record of your health history, and provide it to your doctors: a list of all medications, supplements, and vitamins you are taking; any infections you may have, and exposure to infectious diseases; any drug allergies or reactions to drugs you have had. If you have had tests or x-rays taken, take them with you so that you have a complete history available.

Some resources that APWU Health Plan provides to help you are our online Hospital Quality Guide where you can compare hospital quality for certain procedures or overall quality, and the online Health Library from the Mayo Clinic that gives up-to-date information to make informed decisions and understand conditions, both at www.apwuhp.com on our online PPO Directory. The Health Plan's Nurse Advisory Line offers free advice 24/7 to help make sound healthcare decisions. The Health Plan's Radiology/imaging precertification provides members with radiology management of high-tech outpatient radiological procedures to assure that members receive tests that offer the best help with a diagnosis.

Sources: National Institutes of Health, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *FDA Consumer*