

## Risks associated with your anaesthetic

# Section 3: Shivering

**A**t the end of your operation, you will be taken to the recovery room. Staff in the recovery room will be with you at all times and will continue to monitor your blood pressure, oxygen levels, pulse rate and temperature. Some people shiver during this period. This article gives you information about shivering after an anaesthetic and how it can be prevented and treated.

Shivering after an anaesthetic is a very common problem. It can cause a great deal of discomfort.

*'It was incredibly frightening. I felt so cold, and I didn't know what to do or how to stop it. I thought something must be dreadfully wrong'*

Although it can be extremely distressing, shivering is not usually dangerous<sup>1</sup> and should stop within 20 to 30 minutes. It can occur after a general anaesthetic and during or after a regional anaesthetic (for example, an epidural or spinal).

### What causes it?

Most shivering after an operation is due to a fall in your core (central) body temperature.<sup>2,3</sup> This occurs because parts of your body may be exposed to a cool environment during your operation. Anaesthetic drugs and gases can contribute to this fall by reducing your body's natural ability to regulate your own temperature. Epidural and spinal anaesthetics increase heat loss by dilating (opening up more widely) blood vessels in the skin.

Shivering may also occur without a fall in core body temperature. It can be caused by anaesthetic drugs and gases, and is more likely if you have pain following your operation.<sup>4</sup>

### What is done to prevent it?

Care is taken to keep you warm before, during and after your operation. If you

are kept warm before your operation, you are less likely to be cold afterwards. There are some things that you can do to help you stay warm before your operation:<sup>5</sup>

- ▶ Remember that the hospital may be colder than your own home.
- ▶ Bring warm clothing, such as a dressing gown, to keep you comfortably warm before your operation.
- ▶ Tell the staff if you feel cold at any time during your hospital stay.

By keeping warm before your operation, you can help avoid shivering afterwards.

Depending on the length and type of your operation, your anaesthetist and recovery nurses may use some other ways to keep you warm. These can include heating any intra-venous fluids that you may receive and using a heated blanket filled with warm air.<sup>5</sup>

### How often does shivering happen?

Shivering following an anaesthetic is a very common problem. Even using measures to prevent a fall in body temperature, shivering may still occur in up to 1 in 4 patients following a general anaesthetic.<sup>6</sup> The risk of shivering is increased in younger patients and during long operations and orthopaedic operations.<sup>7</sup> Shivering may also be more common when epidural or spinal anaesthesia is used.<sup>3</sup>

## What can be done if shivering occurs?

When you get to the recovery room, your temperature will be measured. If you are cold, the nurses will use warming blankets to help warm you up again. This is usually all that is required to stop shivering, although it may take some time for your temperature to return to normal.

There are also a number of drugs which can be used to treat shivering, although it is usually considered best to wait until the shivering stops on its own. None of the drugs is 100% effective and all may have side effects. The most effective drugs include pethidine, clonidine and doxapram.<sup>8</sup> If you are in pain following

your operation, treatment of your pain may also help to reduce your shivering.

Shivering will stop on its own and, although distressing, it is generally not dangerous. It does, however, increase your body's requirement for oxygen so you may be given additional oxygen via a mask.

A nurse will be with you at all times in the recovery room and they will make sure that you are warm and as comfortable as possible following your operation.

If you have suffered from post-operative shivering in the past this does not indicate that you will definitely shiver with surgery and anaesthetics in the future.

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