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GETTING A SECOND OPINION



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*Your Choice Facing
Elective Surgery*

Think about it.

When your doctor recommends surgery for the treatment of a non-emergency medical problem, you owe it to yourself to understand all the facts involved.

Most of the nine million surgical procedures performed in the United States each year result in desired outcomes of better health, the repair of undesirable conditions or the control of disease. But, not all surgery is necessary. Some may even be unwarranted. Some can be deferred. And many conditions may be treated just as effectively without surgery.

While physicians usually agree on whether surgery is actually unwarranted, they may not always come to the same conclusion as to whether elective surgery is the best course of action for a particular patient. In some cases the choices in a situation may weigh equally, and the preference of you, the patient, may tilt the decision toward or against surgery. In all cases you are entitled to know the range of choices open to you, to have those choices objectively considered by professionals, and to have your own preferences considered before undergoing a surgical procedure.

If your physician recommends surgery, and it is not an emergency, you may want to be sure that the recommendation is the best choice for you. You may want to get a second opinion from another physician. Medicare, as well as many private health insurance plans, encourages second opinions. Medicare will help pay for a second opinion in the same way it pays for other services of a physician.

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK

Before agreeing to any non-emergency surgery, you should know the answers to these questions:

1. What does the doctor say is the matter with you?
2. What is the operation the doctor plans to do?
3. What are the likely benefits to you of the operation?
4. What are the risks of the surgery and how likely are they to occur?
5. How long would the recovery period be and what is involved?
6. What are the costs of the operation?
7. What will happen if you don't have the operation?
8. Are there other ways to treat your condition that could be tried first?

Ask these and any other questions you may have to get a full understanding about your surgery or treatment. Your decision may be better for it.

WHEN YOU SHOULD GET A SECOND OPINION

Sometimes surgery is done on an emergency basis, because any delay could be life-threatening. Cases of acute appendicitis or injuries from an accident are considered emergency. Second opinions are seldom possible for this kind of surgery because it must be done right away or within a few days.

But much surgery is not an emergency. You have the time to choose when you want to have it, and even if you will have it. Some operations that are usually NOT emergencies are tonsillectomies, gall bladder operations, hysterectomies, hernia repairs and some cataract operations.

Getting a second opinion is standard medical practice. Most doctors want their patients to be as informed as possible about their condition.

HOW TO FIND A SPECIALIST TO GIVE YOU A SECOND OPINION

If your doctor recommends non-emergency surgery, there are several ways to find a surgeon or another specialist in the treatment of your medical problem:

1. Ask your doctor to give you the name of another doctor to see. Do not hesitate to ask; most physicians will encourage you to seek the second opinion.
2. If you would rather find another doctor on your own:
 - You can contact a local medical society, osteopathic or podiatric schools in your area for the names of doctors who specialize in the field in which your illness falls.
 - You can call Medicare's toll-free number, (800) 638-6833. In Maryland, call (800) 492-6603, to find out how to locate a specialist near you.
 - If you're covered by Medicare, you can call your local Social Security Office (listed in your telephone directory under Health and Human Services).
 - If you're eligible for Medicaid, you can call your local welfare office.

GETTING A SECOND OPINION

Some people do not feel comfortable letting their doctor know they want a second opinion. However, if you tell your doctor, you can also ask that your records be sent to the second doctor. In this way, you may be able to avoid the time, costs and discomfort of having to repeat tests that have already been done.

When getting a second opinion, you should tell the second doctor:

- the name of the surgical procedure recommended, and
- any test you know you have had.

If the second doctor agrees that surgery is the best way to treat your problems, he or she will usually send you back to the first doctor to do the surgery.

If the second doctor disagrees with the first, most people find that they have the facts they need to make their own decision. If you are confused by different opinions, you may wish to go back to the first doctor to further discuss your case. Or you may wish to talk to a third physician.

PAYING FOR A SECOND OPINION

Medicare will pay for the second opinion at the same rate it pays for other services.

Always ask your doctors, therapists or other medical suppliers if they will accept assignment of Medicare benefits as full payment.

Many private insurance companies pay for second opinions. You can contact your health insurance representatives for details. Most state Medicaid programs will also pay for second opinions.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- You can get a second opinion whenever non-emergency surgery is recommended. Most doctors approve of patients getting a second opinion and will assist you in doing so.
- Second opinions are a way for you to get additional expert advice from another doctor who knows a lot about treating medical problems like yours.
- Second opinions can reassure you—and your doctor—that the decision to have the surgery is the correct one.
- Second opinions are your right as a patient. They can help you make a better informed decision about non-emergency surgery.
- Medicare will pay 80 percent of reasonable charges for beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare Part B who seek a second opinion. A third opinion, if necessary, will be covered the same way.
- Patients may call a Health Care Financing Administration toll-free number, 800-638-6833 to locate the name of a nearby second opinion health specialist.
- The final decision regarding your health is up to you. After all, it's your body. Isn't your body worth a second opinion?

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