Having an emergency appendectomy

This leaflet explains more about coming into hospital for an appendectomy. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the nurse or doctor caring for you.

What is an appendectomy?

An appendectomy is a surgical procedure (operation) to remove the appendix. The appendix is a small, finger shaped organ protruding from the large intestine (bowel) in the lower right side of your abdomen. You may need an appendectomy if your appendix has become inflamed, infected or perforated (ruptured). An appendectomy is often carried out as an emergency procedure, because you are suffering from acute appendicitis. However, it can also be performed when the inflammation has reduced.

What happens before my operation?

At the hospital, you will be asked to have a wash and change into a surgical gown. You will be given some anti-embolism socks to wear to prevent blood clots in your legs whilst you have your operation. You may also be given a small blood-thinning injection. This is quite routine, and ensures that you are prepared for the operation. You will be visited by the anaesthetist, who will check your general health and explain more about your anaesthetic. You will also see your surgeon, to explain more about the surgery, and answer any questions you may have. They will ask you to sign a consent form to show that you agree to have the operation. You will be given a copy of this, for your own records.

How is an appendectomy performed?

Depending on your condition, the operation can be done laparoscopically (through a small incision – also called ‘keyhole surgery’) or as an open procedure. An incision will be made into the bottom right hand side of your tummy (just below your hip bone), where your appendix can be located and removed. If you have developed an abscess on your appendix, this will also be drained and washed away, and you may have a small drain left in for a few days after your surgery.

If the operation is done laparoscopically, a thin camera will also be inserted into your tummy and special instruments will be used to remove the appendix. However, if the appendix has ruptured, the doctors will not be able to perform keyhole surgery and may need to make a bigger cut down the middle of your tummy.

If your appendix has not ruptured, you will be able to go home within a day or so. However, patients with a ruptured appendix may need to stay in hospital for longer. A more serious complication of this rupture is called peritonitis. This is the inflammation of the peritoneum – the layer of tissue that lines the tummy and all the organs within it. Again, this will prolong your hospital stay.
What happens after the operation?
After your operation, you will go into the recovery area to be monitored as you wake up from the anaesthetic. Once you are recovered, you will be taken back to the ward. You may have a drip attached to your arm to give you fluids whilst you are unable to eat or drink anything by mouth. You will have a dressing over your wound, and your blood pressure, pulse and wound will be monitored regularly. You can start to drink after the operation, and eat as you feel hungry. You will be able to get out of bed a few hours after your surgery, and the nursing staff will help you the first time you attempt this. You may feel drowsy for a day or so as the anaesthetic wears off, so take it easy and do not make any important decisions, sign any legal documents or operate machinery for at least 24 hours after your operation.

Will it be painful?
It is normal to have some pain in your tummy and around the wound for several days after your surgery. You will be offered regular painkillers by the nurses caring for you. The size of your wound will depend on whether you have had an open or keyhole procedure. Your tummy may feel bloated afterwards, but this will settle in time. If you have had a keyhole procedure, you may experience some pain in your shoulder. This is due to the air inserted along with the camera.

Please tell the nursing staff looking after you if you experience any pain and they will be able to help with your pain control. You may also notice that you have a sore throat afterwards. This is due to the breathing tube placed in your throat for the anaesthetic. Again, this pain will go in a day or two.

When can I go home?
You can go home once you:
- feel ready
- can eat and drink without feeling sick
- have no signs of infection
- have had your wound checked to make sure it is ok
- can get out of bed and move around
- can manage your pain at home with tablets.

How do I look after my wound?
Before you leave the ward, the nursing staff will instruct you on how to care for your wound.

Your dressing will be changed just before you leave hospital, or earlier if it is heavily soiled.

The nurses will tell you whether your stitches need to be removed or are dissolvable, and also whether you need to see your own practice nurse for more dressings. Your wound may look a little bruised after the surgery – this is normal and will go in time.

It is fine for you to have a shower or a bath once you are at home.

When will my bowels return to normal?
You may find that you have either constipation or diarrhoea after your operation – this is very common. It may take some time for your bowels to return to normal, but if you are concerned, please speak to your GP. A mild laxative in the short term, and a high fibre diet may help if you feel constipated. Remember to drink plenty of fluids so that you do not become dehydrated.
When can I return to work?
You can return to work/normal activities as soon as you feel able to. This will depend on your type of surgery you have had and the type of work that you do (physical work or non-physical work). We generally recommend that you take a couple of weeks off, but you may wish to go back to work sooner if you are in a non-physical job. If your job involves heavy lifting or manual labour, we recommend that you take at least 4–6 weeks off. Please discuss this with your GP.

What shall I do if I have any problems?
If your wound becomes very tender or very hot to touch, or if you get some leakage from the wound or you notice a swelling, please call the hospital ward you were on for advice. Your GP and practice nurse will also be able to advise you about this or any other question you have about your recovery.

It is not usual practice to have any follow up after this procedure, unless you have any further issues or complications.

We hope that you have found this leaflet helpful and wish you a speedy recovery.

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about your appendectomy, please contact the ward you were discharged from or call the gastrointestinal unit at St Thomas’ Hospital on 020 7188 4070.

Pharmacy medicines helpline
For information about any medicines that you have been prescribed at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals, you can speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.
t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:
e: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas’ t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy’s e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)
For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas’ Hospital.
t: 020 7188 3416

NHS Choices
Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.
w: www.nhs.uk