

Risks associated with your anaesthetic

Section 2: Sore throat

After a general anaesthetic you may develop a sore throat. This can range between a minor discomfort and a more severe continuous pain. You may also have a very dry throat or feel pain on speaking or swallowing. These symptoms may disappear after a few hours but may take two days or more to settle down. Recent advances in anaesthetic equipment mean that having a very sore throat is less common than before.

Why does a sore throat happen?

During any general anaesthetic your anaesthetist must make sure that you can breathe freely. He/she must also make sure that secretions or stomach contents, which can collect in your throat during an anaesthetic, do not get into your trachea (windpipe) or your lungs.

Your anaesthetist will choose one of several methods to achieve these things, depending on your medical condition and on what operation you are having. He or she may use the following.

- ▶ A tracheal tube. This is positioned in your trachea (windpipe) and has a soft cuff, which is inflated to prevent leakage of gases or movement of secretions.
- ▶ A laryngeal mask airway. This is a different shaped tube, which sits in the back of the throat above the opening to the trachea. It also has a soft inflatable cuff.
- ▶ A face mask. This is held firmly onto your face, with or without a separate plastic Guedel airway that sits over the tongue.

During your anaesthetic it may also be necessary to use additional tubes placed in your nose or mouth to empty your stomach or remove secretions.

All of these tubes or masks are used after you are anaesthetised and you are not usually aware of their use. However, any of them may contribute to a sore throat as follows.

- ▶ During insertion each may cause irritation or damage to your throat. Your anaesthetist will make every effort to prevent damage, but some damage can still occur, especially if the tube is difficult to insert.
- ▶ The tracheal tube and the laryngeal mask airway both have a cuff, which is inflated for the duration of your anaesthetic. This may press on parts of your throat or airway causing swelling and discomfort.
- ▶ Anaesthetic gases and some drugs can dry your throat. This may also contribute to a sore throat following your anaesthetic.

How likely is it to occur?

After a general anaesthetic with a tracheal tube the risk of developing a sore throat is estimated to be between 1 in 5 and 1 in 7.¹⁻³

After a general anaesthetic with a laryngeal mask airway the risk may be as low as 1 in 25.⁴

If any additional tubes are required in your nose or mouth, there is an increased chance of getting a sore throat.

Young women are more likely to get a sore throat after a general anaesthetic than other people.¹

What can be done about it?

In most cases symptoms disappear without any specific treatment. Severe cases can be treated with pain relief medicines and gargling may help to reduce inflammation and pain.

What happens if the symptoms do not disappear?

If your symptoms have not disappeared after two days or if you are having problems with breathing, coughing up blood or hoarseness in your voice, you should contact your general practitioner or anaesthetist for further advice.

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