

Splenectomy

Information for patients

This leaflet is for patients who have had their spleen removed, whose spleen isn't present or doesn't work properly.

Splenectomy is an operation to remove the spleen. Doctors may commonly perform a splenectomy because the spleen:

- has been damaged in a serious accident;
- has been damaged by disease;
- contains a growth or tumour;
- has become overactive.

Some people are born without a spleen or have had their spleen removed (this is called asplenia) or their spleen does not work properly (this is called splenic dysfunction).

What does the spleen do?

The spleen helps the body's defence against bacterial infections.

If you do not have a spleen you will still be able to cope with most infections, but in some cases serious infection may develop quickly. The risk of this happening is higher in children than in adults but it is still very small.

What should I do if I do not have a spleen?

- Remind your doctor and dentist that you do not have a spleen.
- Carry a card or wear an identifying bracelet or necklace to alert other people in an emergency.
- Make sure you have received all your routine childhood immunisations (talk to your doctor or nurse, or visit www.publichealth.hscni.net); there are also some extra immunisations people with asplenia or splenic dysfunction should have. In particular, you should ensure you have received the following vaccinations to help prevent infections to which you are particularly vulnerable:
 - pneumococcal (PPV);
 - meningococcal ACWY (MenACWY);
 - meningococcal B;
 - flu (every year);
 - COVID-19 and boosters when offered.

Other important information

- You may be recommended to take antibiotics every day to prevent the onset of infections. This is essential in the first few years after your operation and for children under 16 years of age. Tell your doctor if you have been unable to take the antibiotics for any reason.
- Alternatively, you may be given a course of antibiotics to keep at home in case you become ill and there is a delay in seeing your doctor.
- Contact your doctor immediately if you are ill. Most illnesses will be minor and can be dealt with as usual but sometimes a fever, sore throat, severe headache or abdominal pain may be the beginning of something more serious. Early diagnosis and treatment are essential and may be life saving.
- Get treatment for any bites (especially dog bites) urgently and take any antibiotics you are given to prevent infection.
- If you are regularly involved in outdoor pursuits such as trekking or camping, you may be at risk from a rare disease called babesiosis, which is transmitted by ticks and can be mistaken for malaria. You can help protect yourself by wearing clothing to cover exposed skin, especially long trousers to cover the legs. If you become ill, seek medical advice promptly.
- Talk to your doctor before travelling abroad. Extra vaccinations and special precautions to prevent malaria may be necessary.
- It is also wise to carry a course of antibiotics with you when you are travelling abroad, whether or not you are already taking them on a daily basis.

If you require further copies of this leaflet, please ask your GP or download from www.publichealth.hscni.net

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