Splenectomy in adults

This page is about the effects of a splenectomy on adults. For children, see the HealthInfo page on Splenectomy for children.

Some people have conditions that mean their spleen doesn’t work well. These include hyposplenism or splenic atrophy. Some people don’t have a spleen. The information on this page also applies to them.

Splenectomy is the medical name for surgery to remove your spleen.

What does the spleen do?

A person’s spleen helps them develop immunity against infections. It filters foreign substances from their blood, removes worn-out blood cells, regulates the blood flow to their liver and stores some blood cells. Your spleen is in the left side of your body, just under your rib cage, beside your stomach.

Why do I need a splenectomy?

Several conditions can make it necessary to take your spleen out. They include:

- idiopathic thrombocytopenia (ITP)
- congenital (inherited) or acquired haemolytic anaemia
- a clot in the spleen’s blood vessels
- portal hypertension
- hypersplenism
- hereditary spherocytosis
- lymphoma.

People sometimes need an emergency splenectomy after an accident or injury that has damaged their spleen.

Risks

The main risk after having your spleen removed is overwhelming infection. This is called post-splenectomy sepsis. You can reduce your risk of such infection by having vaccinations and antibiotics. After your splenectomy you will get advice about this. You will also get a medical alert bracelet or pendant, and advice on general precautions you should take.

Children under 16 have an even higher risk of infection, and need special care after a splenectomy.

Vaccinations

If your splenectomy is planned (elective), your doctor will give you vaccines against certain infections before surgery, after checking your records to see which ones you have already had. Ideally, you will finish all your vaccinations two to four weeks before surgery. If your splenectomy was an emergency or you were not vaccinated before surgery, you should get vaccinated once you have fully recovered from the operation.

You can get all your vaccinations from your GP or practice nurse. The vaccinations recommended after a splenectomy can change, but your doctor or practice nurse will check you are getting all the currently recommended ones. The health system pays for the vaccinations, but you might need to pay a consultation fee.
It is important you continue to have any boosters your doctor suggests you have. You should also have a flu vaccination every year.

**Antibiotics**

Without a spleen, you are much more likely to get infections. Because of this your doctor will talk to you about taking antibiotics to prevent infections. Guidelines for Australia and New Zealand suggest that after having your spleen removed you should take the following antibiotics for at least two years:

- daily antibiotics: amoxycillin 250 mg daily or phenoxythymethylpenicillin 250 mg twice daily.
  
  Taking antibiotics every day is a good precaution against infection. However, some people have trouble remembering, or get unpleasant side effects after taking them for a while.

- emergency antibiotics if you can't get immediate medical care: amoxycillin 3 g, followed by 1 g every eight hours. Take the antibiotics until you can get medical care.

If you have allergies to these antibiotics, your doctor can prescribe alternatives. Ask your pharmacist to write the expiry date of the antibiotics on the packet. Check regularly to make sure they have not expired. Remember to take your antibiotics with you when you travel away from home.

**Important!**

Go to the Emergency Department or after-hours GP immediately if you have a high fever (above 38°C) or uncontrolled shaking. See a doctor within at least 24 hours if you have a:

- cough with yellow, green or brown sputum
- moderate to severe sore throat
- flu–like illness with tiredness, aching, headache, vomiting, diarrhoea and/or stomach pain.

**Animal bites**

See a doctor immediately if you are bitten by a dog, cat, any other animal, or another person. You are more likely to get an infection from a bite. You will need to get the wound thoroughly washed and dressed, and you may need extra antibiotics.

**Medical alert bracelet**

Wear a medical alert bracelet or pendant, stating that you have had a splenectomy. Search online for medical bracelets NZ to find medical bracelet suppliers. You can also get an application form from your GP, or the department that arranged your splenectomy. Your GP or surgeon needs to sign the form.

**Travelling**

It's best not to travel to areas where malaria is common (such as parts of Africa and Asia). If you must travel to a place with malaria you must be extra strict with taking anti–malarial medications and avoiding mosquito bites. Make sure you get specialist travel advice.

**Splenectomy card**

You should carry a splenectomy card with you all the time. You can get one from the Christchurch Hospital Haematology Department. Phone the department on (03) 364–0384 during working hours to ask for a card.

*Compiled by Haematology Department, Christchurch Hospital. Adapted by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Endorsed by clinical director, Haematology, Canterbury DHB. Updated May 2018.*