

Common events and risks in anaesthesia

This summary card shows the common events and risks that healthy adult patients of normal weight face when having a general anaesthetic for routine surgery (specialist surgeries may carry different risks).

Modern anaesthetics are very safe. There are some common side effects from the anaesthetic drugs or equipment used which are usually not serious or long lasting. Risk will vary between individuals and will depend on the procedure and anaesthetic technique used. Your anaesthetist will discuss with you the risks that they believe to be more significant for you.

There are other less common risks that your anaesthetist will not normally discuss routinely unless they believe you are at higher risk. These have not been shown on this card.



VERY COMMON – MORE THAN 1 IN 10
Equivalent to one person in your family



Sickness



Shivering



Thirst*



Sore throat



Bruising



Temporary memory loss (mainly in over 60s)



COMMON – BETWEEN 1 IN 10 AND 1 IN 100
Equivalent to one person in a street



Pain at the injection site*



Minor lip or tongue injury



UNCOMMON – BETWEEN 1 IN 100 AND 1 IN 1,000
Equivalent to one person in a village



Minor nerve injury



RARE – BETWEEN 1 IN 1,000 AND 1 IN 10,000
Equivalent to one person in a small town



1 in 1,000
Peripheral nerve damage that is permanent



1 in 2,800
Corneal abrasion (scratch on eye)



1 in 4,500
Damage to teeth requiring treatment



1 in 10,000
Anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction to a drug)



VERY RARE – 1 IN 10,000 TO 1 IN 100,000 OR MORE
Equivalent to one person in a large town



The risks we all take in normal life, such as road travel, are actually far higher than the risks below.



1 in 20,000
Awareness during an anaesthetic



1 in 100,000
Loss of vision



1 in 100,000
Death as a direct result of anaesthesia

More information on these risks and how to prepare for surgery can be found on our website here: www.rcoa.ac.uk/patientinfo/risks/risk-leaflets

*The first Sprint National Anaesthesia Project (SNAP-1) Study. *Br J Anaesth* 2016 (<https://academic.oup.com/bja/article/117/6/758/2671124>).