

# What is anaesthesia?

Relieving pain and suffering is central to the practice of anaesthesia, which involves administering medications to eliminate sensations, including pain.

This allows doctors to perform medical and surgical procedures without causing undue distress or discomfort to the patient.

Most people undergo anaesthesia at some stage in their lives, such as during the birth of a baby or during surgery. They may be anaesthetised for a short, simple day surgery or for major surgery requiring complex, rapid decisions.

Modern anaesthesia is relatively safe due to high standards of training that emphasise quality and safety. There also have been improvements in drugs and equipment. Advances in anaesthesia have also resulted in patients being able to have more complex surgery as a day stay procedure because of more rapid recovery with modern anaesthesia; and they have facilitated many of the advances in surgery.

Australia and New Zealand have one of the best patient safety records in the world, thanks to increased support for research to improve anaesthesia.

Specialist anaesthetists become involved in the patient's care prior to surgery with assessment of their medical condition and planning their care as part of the surgical team. They closely monitor the patient's health and wellbeing throughout the procedure and help to ensure a smooth and comfortable recovery.

There are several types of anaesthesia.

**General anaesthesia** produces a drug-induced state where the patient will not respond to any stimuli, including pain. It may be associated with changes in breathing and circulation.

**Local anaesthesia** involves the injection of local anaesthetic near the surgical site and is usually used for minor surgery. It may be used alone or in combination with sedation or general anaesthesia.

**Regional anaesthesia** includes "nerve blocks" and "spinal blocks". This is when local anaesthetic is injected in the vicinity of major nerve bundles that supply body areas such as the thigh, ankle, forearm, hand or shoulder.

**Procedural sedation** is used for procedures where general anaesthesia is not required. It allows patients to tolerate procedures that may otherwise be uncomfortable or painful.

**Conscious sedation** is a medication-induced state that reduces the patient's level of consciousness. A sedated patient does not feel pain but can respond to verbal commands or touch.

**Analgesia** is when a patient is given medications that act locally or generally to stop them from experiencing pain.