

The 10 things you should know about patient awareness:

1. It is extremely rare, occurring in only about one-fifth of 1 percent of all anesthetics. When it does occur, often times it is fleeting and not traumatic.
2. Patients experiencing awareness generally do not feel any pain.
3. Awareness can include everything from dreaming to some awareness of your surroundings before and after surgery.
4. Anesthesiologists are actively studying this condition and are seeking the most effective ways to prevent it.
5. Awareness can occur in high-risk surgeries such as trauma and cardiac surgery in which the body will not tolerate a deep anesthetic. In those instances, anesthesiologists may decide that the potential for awareness is the best medical decision in saving a patient's life. The same is true during cesarean section, particularly emergency situations, when a deep anesthetic is not best for the mother or child.
6. Counseling may be helpful if you experience awareness.
7. Anesthesiologists have led the way in developing life-saving technology that has led to a 25-fold improvement in patient safety during surgery over the last 20 years.
8. Brain-wave monitoring devices have not yet been shown to enhance the safety of anesthetics given with already-proven technology and the exercise of sound medical judgment.
9. New brain-wave monitoring devices currently being tested may prove to be helpful in preventing awareness, but they need to undergo the same rigorous scientific review process that has led to wide adoption of other medical technologies.
10. Anesthesiologists are the patient's advocate in the operating room, and patients should talk with their anesthesiologist before surgery to discuss all of their concerns, including the remote possibility of awareness.

"Patient Awareness — What Is It?" has been prepared by the American Society of Anesthesiologists.

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Patient Awareness

What Is it?

What Is Patient Awareness?

Patient awareness is a very rare condition

that occurs when surgical patients dream during surgery, have some awareness of their surroundings or may recall an event. It is estimated that awareness occurs in only one-fifth of 1 percent of all surgeries. When it does occur, it is usually just prior to the anesthetic taking effect completely or as the patient is emerging from anesthesia. In very few instances, it occurs during surgery but rarely do patients experience any pain. Nonetheless your anesthesiologist and the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) want you to know about this remote possibility. ASA has been studying this issue for some time and is in the process of evaluating various technologies, including new types of brain-wave monitors, to see which, if any, are effective in preventing this unwanted condition.

Why Does It Happen?

In some high-risk surgeries such as trauma or cardiac surgery, the body simply will not tolerate a deep anesthetic. In these circumstances, the anesthesiologist may decide that it is worth the potential occurrence of awareness in order to save a patient's life. In addition, while the safety of anesthesia has increased 25-fold over the last 20 years, people may react differently to the same level or same type of anesthesia. That's one of the reasons why it's important to have an anesthesiologist involved in your surgery.

No monitoring device can replace the judgment of a physician who has more than 8 years of medical training and years in clinical practice.

How Can It Be Avoided?



As patient advocates, anesthesiologists are working hard to reduce the incidence of awareness. Currently, proven technologies, including electroencephalograms (EEG) that track brain activity, are used to monitor patients' vital signs during surgery.

Extensive research is

under way by anesthesiologists in prestigious medical centers around the world to develop and study new technologies that lessen awareness. However, none of the new technologies has been perfected, and studies indicate that while they may be helpful, they may also give false readings that could actually lead to higher levels of awareness. Until these new technologies—including brain-wave monitors—are proven, each anesthesiologist will guide you safely through your surgery relying on his or her experience and judgment combined with proven technology.

What should I do if I think I have experienced awareness?

ASA urges you to talk with your anesthesiologist. It may be helpful to have the anesthesiologist explain to you the events that took place in the operating room at each stage of your surgery and why you might have been aware at certain times. It is important to note that a variety of anesthetic agents are used, some of which create false

memories or no memory at all of various aspects before and after surgery. If you have distinct recollections of your surgery and want to discuss them with a psychiatrist or psychologist at the hospital, your anesthesiologist can refer you to the proper physician or counselor.