

## Episode 6 – Improving Your Health Before Surgery

**Intro (Alan):** Do you have an upcoming surgery? Are you feeling a little bit overwhelmed? Then this is the podcast for you. Welcome to Operation Preparation. You are listening to the Pre Anaesthetic Assessment Clinic podcast or PAAC for short from St. James's Hospital Dublin. Here, we put together a series of short episodes to help you, your family, and your loved ones learn more about your upcoming perioperative experience.

**Aislinn:** Welcome to episode 6, improving your health before surgery. So in this episode, we're going to talk about things to do to improve your health before you come for surgery. Today, we've got Alan, Rosie, and myself Aislinn, but I'm going to hand you over to Clare to kick off.

**Clare:** Thanks Aislinn. So, Alan, I'll ask you the first question. My surgeon has already told me I need to have surgery. So why is it so important to have the anaesthetic team involved before surgery?

**Alan:** It's a really good question. Why are we getting involved at all? Well, as we said before in episode 1 and 2, there are many benefits to attending a pre assessment clinic such as undergoing a risk assessment and making a safe plan of care for you, providing information to you to help you prepare for your anaesthetic so you can make informed decisions about your care and hopefully alleviate anxiety, and arranging for further preoperative investigations like blood tests or heart tracing, also known as an ECG. And we can also identify other health issues that may cause delays or cancellations on the day of surgery.

Another really important aspect of pre assessment is that we look to see if there are ways we can improve your general health as best as we can wherever possible before your surgery. This can help improve your surgical outcomes and recovery.

**Clare:** Thanks, Alan. So there's loads of benefits of attending the Pre Anesthetic Assessment Clinic. So patients shouldn't just turn up for surgery?

**Alan:** No. It's strongly recommended that you have a pre anesthetic assessment prior to the day of surgery.

In episode 2, we heard of an example of a patient, John, who had uncontrolled high blood pressure even though he was already on blood pressure controlling medication. By coming to the pre assessment clinic, his uncontrolled high blood pressure was identified, and we were able to intervene and help to get John's blood pressure under control prior to arriving for his operation. And this prevented a cancellation or delay on the day of surgery for John and also reduced his risk of postoperative complications.

**Clare:** Thanks, Alan. And, Rosie, what can I do in the time leading up to my surgery?

**Rosie:** Oh, there's so much that can be done before your surgery, that can help get your body and mind ready. So from the time that a surgeon tells you that you need to have surgery to the time that you actually get your procedure, there's an awful lot that can be done. So the

stronger and healthier that you are, the more likely you are to heal and recover quickly. It's a great opportunity to start improving your health and adopt a healthier lifestyle.

**Clare:** And why is this important?

**Rosie:** So coming for surgery, it is an anxious time. So taking an active role in preparing for your surgery can really help make you feel more that you're in control. It's important because it can have benefits for you such as helping you feel more prepared for your surgery, having a quicker recovery time, less chance of developing complications like a wound or a chest infection. You could have a shorter stay in hospital, and also there's long term health benefits as well.

**Clare:** That's great. Thanks, Rosie. And Aislinn and Alan, how can I improve my health before surgery?

**Aislinn:** So I have 3 top tips to give you a stronger start for surgery, and the first top tip is around eating well. So we need to have good nutrition to help us heal. It's really important both before and after surgery.

There's really great website from the HSE on advice eating well as well. And some of the key messages are things like eat more vegetables, salad, fruits. You're trying to get in about 7 servings a day. With that then, try and reduce your intake of high fat, sugar content, high salt content, food, and drinks. You should also look at things like the size or the amount of food that you're eating and the amount of which particular food. So using the food pyramid as a guide for your serving sizes.

With that in mind as well, you should also try and increase your physical activity levels. And this is so important because as I always say to patients in clinic, you would never run a marathon without training, so you shouldn't have an anaesthetic without doing some sort of preparation for it. So we really want you to be active. Your hearts and your lungs work harder after or during surgery and after surgery to help you heal. So to prep for that, we recommend that you would do activities 5 times a week for 30 minutes. Start slowly. Start where you're at and build up. We always want you to stay within your limits. But if you feel any new symptoms like chest pain, dizziness, your heartbeat becoming irregular, please make sure you seek medical advice at that point.

You can do gentle activities like walking, cycling, swimming, but you should feel slightly out of breath with whatever you're doing. Try and maintain the ability though to have a conversation or to finish a sentence when you're exercising.

So the 3rd top tip I have is reducing your alcohol intake. We'd recommend that you would drink within the recommended limits for alcohol in a week. And the reason for that is too much alcohol can have many effects on your body and can make the liver less able to produce the building blocks needed to heal. And in particular, it also dampens your immune system, which you really need to work well around the time of surgery.

**Clare:** And, Alan, how about you? Any top tips?

**Alan:** The first one I would hope that most people would recognize that smokers would be at an increased risk of postoperative complications, sometimes by as much as 40%. But what many people don't realize is that stopping smoking even on the day before your operation can lower your risk of complications. For example, your blood pressure will start to improve within 20 minutes of stopping smoking. The overall risk of a heart attack starts dropping from as early as 24 hours after your last cigarette. And your breathing tubes, these are the tubes within your lungs that allow air to move easily in and out, will start relaxing from as little as 72 hours onwards. Obviously, in the long term longer term, your lifetime risk of cancer, stroke, and heart attacks will continue to drop. But in general, stopping smoking prior to surgery reduces the risk of chest infections afterwards, can help wounds to heal faster, can reduce the total time needed to remain in hospital following surgery, and can even reduce the chances of you needing admission to the intensive care unit.

If you do wish to stop smoking before surgery, there are plenty of resources available to help. And you can start by talking with your GP or by visiting the *quit.ie* website. We can also refer you to the smoking cessation nurse here at St. James's Hospital. One thing is certain and that's that getting support to stop smoking will dramatically increase the chances of you successfully staying off smoking.

My second tip would be to look after your mental health throughout the whole perioperative experience. And this starts with the time that you're first referred for surgery and carries through up until you've made a full recovery. This can be a stressful time for yourselves and your family. So it's normal to feel stressed or anxious at any time throughout this entire journey. There are lots of local supports available should you feel particularly anxious or stressed before surgery, including talking to your GP.

The HSE website has advice on mental health as well as information on supports available to you. My final top tip would be that if you do have any chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, anaemia, or problems with your thyroid gland, that you would attend your GP in advance or specialist as appropriate to make sure that these conditions have been well looked after or have been optimized prior to surgery. In particular, if any of your chronic conditions have changed in the previous number of months, now would be a good time to get these looked at.

**Clare:** Okay. Thanks Aislinn and Alan. And, Rosie, can you give us the key messages then from this episode?

**Rosie:** Yeah. So what we're trying to get across is that the time leading up to your surgery it's a great opportunity to get your body and your mind ready for surgery. So by taking an active role in preparing for your surgery, it can help you feel more in control. I suppose the clue is in the name. It's 'Operation Preparation'. So the main steps are eat well, be active, reduce your alcohol intake, stop smoking, look after your mental health, and manage your medical conditions. So this can help to improve your surgical outcomes and recovery as well as long term benefits to your health. So for more information on the tips that we talked about today, you can check out our 'Operation Preparation Steps for a Stronger Start' page on the Saint James's website.

**Aislinn:** Thanks, Rosie, and thanks everybody for listening to the first series of 'Operation Preparation'.

Make sure to keep an eye on our web page for further updates, and we hope to see you all back for series 2. Thank you.

**Outro (Alan):** You have been listening to 'Operation Preparation', the Pre Anaesthetic Assessment Clinic podcast from St. James's Hospital Dublin. Don't forget to subscribe and check out our website, links, and abbreviations in our show notes to learn more about the topics we've covered today. If you have a question that you would like us to cover here, email the podcast at [perioperativepodcast@stjames.ie](mailto:perioperativepodcast@stjames.ie). Thank you for listening. Until next time.