

Episode 7 – Pre-operative Fasting

(Intro) Fiona: 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.

Fiona: Welcome back to the second season of operation preparation. My name is Fiona, and I'm a junior doctor working in anaesthesia. With me, I have Dr. Aislinn Sherwin, consultant anaesthesiologist, and Pam, one of our clinical nurse specialists in the clinic. Today, we are going to discuss the importance of fasting before surgery. So to get into it, why are we doing this episode, Pam?

Pam: So, Fiona, we touched on fasting before briefly in episodes four and five. But after a few queries from patients, we felt it warranted further discussion. After all, if fasting is not done correctly, you could end up having your surgery cancelled, and nobody wants that.

Fiona: Absolutely. And, Aislinn, what is fasting?

Aislinn: Thanks, Fiona. So simply put, fasting is not having any food or drink for a specific time frame. And we usually tell our patients at St. James' to fast from midnight on the day before their surgery, and this means that the majority of people will be fasting for about eight to ten hours before their operation.

Key thing to mention, your instructions for fasting definitely depend on what hospital you're attending. They also depend on what time of the day you're coming into hospital to have your surgery, and also the specific fasting policy or instructions of the hospital. Here in St. James's, our fasting instructions do not allow for food or solids. And by food or solids, I mean everything from your usual fry up, milk, NG feeds, gastrostomy feeds, or thickened fluids for a minimum of six hours before surgery, and that's normally from midnight the night before your surgery. We do allow our patients, however, to continue to drink unlimited clear fluids up until two hours prior to their surgery.

Fiona: And so to be clear, excuse the pun, what do we mean by clear fluids?

Pam: So what we mean by clear fluids are water, black tea or coffee, cordial, pulp free juice, or carbohydrate rich drinks that you would be given by the hospital. For the two hours immediately before your procedure, you can sip water or juice, and that's just to keep your mouth moist for your comfort. If you're coming in for an afternoon surgery, you can have a light breakfast, tea and toast, before 7AM. You can drink unlimited clear fluids up until 10AM and then sips of water or juice until you present for your surgery. Our policy is known as 'Sips Till Send' and is the specific fasting instructions for St. James's Hospital. Lots of hospitals are moving towards this policy as research shows that dehydration caused by too much fasting may lead to lower levels of fluid during the procedure. Also, reducing the duration of fasting leads to patients' physical and mental stress being reduced. There should be posters in each ward with all this information available for patients to read and understand.

Fiona: And moving on from that, Pam, why is it important to fast?

Pam: So there's lots of myths about fasting, and some people have believed that you need to fast so that you wouldn't vomit over the surgical site or the surgeon while you were having your procedure, or that it would help them not to feel sick afterwards. But in fact, the real and very important reason for patients not to eat fast before surgery is to reduce the risk of aspiration, and I think Aislinn is going to talk us through aspiration in a bit more detail.

Aislinn: Thanks, Pam. So if you eat before your surgery, there's a risk that the contents of your stomach can travel up into your lungs while you're under an anaesthetic, and this is the medical term called 'aspiration'. The reason this happens is that the muscle that controls the opening at the top of your stomach can relax or open during the administration of your general anaesthetic. And if it does relax or open, anything that's in your stomach at that time can travel back up your oesophagus or your food pipe. Usually, if you are awake and aware and this happened to you, you would vomit and you would cough and prevent that food going into your airway. However, because you're under anaesthetic, you're not aware of this and you're not able obviously to vomit or cough. So this can lead then to the food traveling into your airways and lungs, and it can cause blockage of the airways as well as inflammation and infection of the lungs as it is a quite acidic fluid, in your stomach. This can lead to a number of complications like chest infections, pneumonias, lung damage, or scarring. And we also have to send you to the intensive care unit for monitoring of your breathing and oxygen levels afterwards if this does happen to a patient.

Fiona: Thank you, Aislinn, for that really clear and important explanation on the importance of fasting and aspiration. And as you know, I love a flat white in the morning. Why can we drink certain liquids, before surgery but not milk?

Pam: So, Fiona, it's this is the most common mistake that patients make. Yes. Milk is a fluid, but milk or dairy products in anaesthetic terms are looked on as food. This is because there is high levels of fat in the milk, and it takes your stomach a longer time to empty if you drink something with milk in it. This is why we will always stress you can drink black tea and coffee, but not to add milk to it.

Fiona: And what happens if I do have my favourite latte or flat white before my surgery?

Aislinn: So it really depends on the kind of surgery and the schedule for theatre that day, Fiona. More often than not, unfortunately, patients are cancelled. If we can facilitate your procedure, we can try to move you to a time later in the day when you've hit that magic six hours of fasting. But as I've said, more likely because we have full theatre lists going on, you'll probably be cancelled and need to come back on a different day. And obviously, this does impact your plans as you'll have to wait, a number of weeks or potentially months in order to get a new date for your surgery. So it's really in your best interest to stick to the guidelines that are given to you.

Fiona: Okay. And suppose something happens me and I need immediate surgery, what happens in these emergency situations?

Aislinn: That's a really good question, Fiona, actually. If you're admitted as an emergency, we do a risk and benefit analysis of all of our patients. If you do need to have the operation before you've been fasted for six hours, then we're going to have to take precautions so that that aspiration we talked about before, we reduce that risk of it. What we do is what's termed a 'rapid sequence induction', and this means that the anaesthetist and the anaesthetic team, we manage the risk while we're administering your anaesthetic to try and reduce that risk of aspiration. So for you as the patient, what that means is that as you are going to sleep, you'll feel some pressure on the front of your neck by the anaesthetic nurse. What they're trying to do when they do this is to put some pressure on the oesophagus or the food pipe to prevent any fluid or food that may come up from the stomach getting into your airway. This method can also be used if you're a person who suffers with very severe acid reflux as well.

Fiona: It's a really clear explanation. Thank you. And, Pam, can I take my medications if I'm fasting?

Pam: So Fiona, the simple answer is yes. You would have been given your preoperative instructions beforehand regarding your medications, and it's perfectly fine to take those medications with a sip of water. Advice regarding medications was touched on in episodes four and five and will be discussed again in episode eight.

Fiona: And how soon after my operation can I eat?

Pam: If you're a day case, we usually like you to have something to eat or drink before you can go home, but this will depend on the kind of surgery you've had and your condition. The nurses on the day surgery will know when you're ready for this.

Fiona: Great. Thanks, Pam. And what do I get to eat after all my fasting?

Aislinn: Well, simply, Fiona. It's the best tea and toast you've ever had!!!

Fiona: Thanks. So, really, the take home messages are you need to fast for a minimum of six hours before surgery so we can ensure patient safety. Absolutely no milk in your tea or coffee, and water is your friend. We encourage you to drink as much water until two hours before your surgery and sips of water until you are sent for it to the Operating Theatre. Thanks everyone for listening.

Thank you, Aislinn and Pam, for sharing all your knowledge. And join us in the next episode where we will speak about medication management around the time of surgery.

(Outro) Fiona: You have been listening to 'Operation Preparation', 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 covered today. If you have a question that you would like us to cover here, email

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