Removing Metalware

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This fact sheet is for general information about this procedure only. It is not intended to be used as medical advice or to replace advice that your relevant healthcare professional would give you. If you have a particular medical problem, please consult a healthcare professional.

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What is metalware used for?

Metalware includes plates, screws, rods and wires. These are specially made from stainless steel or titanium for the following operations on bones.

- Fixing a broken bone in position while it heals
- Joining bones to remove an arthritic joint
- Changing the shape of a bone

What are the benefits of surgery?

The following are the main reasons for having your metalware removed.

- To reduce any pain or discomfort.
- To help treat an infection around the metalware.
- To stop the metalware from disappearing inside the bone.
- To stop the metalware from getting in the way if you need another operation later.

Are there any alternatives to surgery?

Pain or discomfort from your metalware can sometimes be helped by taking painkillers, avoiding pressure over the metalware and keeping warm when the weather is cold.

If you have an infection around the metalware, you can sometimes keep it under control by taking antibiotics.

What will happen if I decide not to have the operation?

Even if the metalware causes discomfort, it is usually safe to leave it in place. In very rare cases small pieces of wire have been known to cause problems.

If you have an infection around the metalware, it can damage the bone and soft tissues. Sometimes an infection can make you ill.

What does the operation involve?

Various anaesthetic techniques are possible.

The operation usually takes 30 minutes to an hour.

Your surgeon will usually remove the metalware through the same cut used to put it in. Small screws or wires can sometimes be hard to find and your surgeon may need to use a larger cut and x-rays. Even larger pieces of metalware can be hard to find and remove if they are covered with scar tissue or bone.

How can I prepare myself for the operation?

If you smoke, stopping smoking now may reduce your risk of developing complications and will improve your long-term health.

Try to maintain a healthy weight. You have a higher risk of developing complications if you are overweight. Regular exercise should help to prepare you for the operation, help you to recover and improve your long-term health. Before you start exercising, ask the healthcare team or your GP for advice.

Speak to the healthcare team about any vaccinations you might need to reduce your risk of serious illness while you recover. When you come into hospital, practise hand washing and wear a face covering when asked.

What complications can happen?

The healthcare team will try to reduce the risk of complications.

Any numbers which relate to risk are from studies of people who have had this operation. Your doctor may be able to tell you if the risk of a complication is higher or lower for you.

Some complications can be serious and may even cause death.

General complications of any operation

- Bleeding during or after the operation.
- Infection of the surgical site (wound).
- Allergic reaction to the equipment, materials or medication.
- Difficulty passing urine.
- Blood clot in your leg (deep-vein thrombosis – DVT).
- Blood clot in your lung (pulmonary embolus), if a blood clot moves through your bloodstream to your lungs.

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- Chest infection. Your risk will be lower if you have stopped smoking and you are free of Covid-19 (coronavirus) symptoms for at least 7 weeks before the operation.

Specific complications of this operation

- Failure to remove all metalware.
- Damage to nerves nearby, leading to weakness, numbness or pain. This usually gets better but may be permanent.
- Weakening of the bone. This can lead to a fracture (break) during or after the operation.
- Severe pain, stiffness and loss of use of your arm or leg. It can take months or years to improve. Sometimes there is permanent pain and stiffness.
- Difficulty passing urine.

Consequences of this procedure

- Pain.
- Unsightly scarring of your skin.

How soon will I recover?

You should be able to go home the same day or the day after.

Spend most of the time during the first week with your arm or leg raised so that the swelling settles.

You may be given exercises to help get your joints moving.

Your surgeon will tell you when you can return to normal activities.

It can take 6 months or longer to recover completely from surgery.

Summary

Metalware is often used in operations to help bones to heal. Once your bones have healed, your surgeon may recommend removing the metalware to reduce or prevent any problems it may cause.

Keep this information document. Use it to help you if you need to talk to the healthcare team.

Some information, such as risk and complication statistics, is taken from global studies and/or databases. Please ask your surgeon or doctor for more information about the risks that are specific to you, and they may be able to tell you about any other suitable treatment options.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare team would give you.

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