Open Inguinal Hernia Repair under Local Anasthetic

This guide will help answer many of the frequently asked questions about hernias.

What is a hernia?

A hernia is a weakness in the muscles of the abdomen. This can allow some bowel or fat around the bowel to push through the hole and form a bulge in the groin. Men have a slight weakness in this area because blood vessels and spermatic cord need to reach the testes. This is why hernias are more common in men.

Photo of a man with the bulge of a small groin hernia (arrowed)

How do hernias occur?

Most hernias start after a period of lifting, straining or coughing. This can weaken the groin muscles, cause pain and allow a hernia to bulge through. Hernias are more common in people with heavy manual jobs and become more frequent as you get older.

Do I need an operation to fix it?
Once a hernia has developed, the weakness will always remain – unless it is repaired. Some patients choose not to have an operation, perhaps because of ill health. In this situation a truss may control the hernia by keeping it pushed back inside the abdomen.

What happens if I choose not to have it repaired?
Over time a hernia may become bigger and more troublesome. Sometimes bowel may become trapped in the hernia. This is a strangulated hernia.

What is a strangulated hernia?
If bowel becomes stuck in the hernia it may become blocked and trapped. If this happens the hernia bulge may become warm, red and painful to touch. You may also feel sick or vomit. This is a medical emergency and you should contact your GP or attend the Accident and Emergency department.

Can I be awake during the operation?
Many patients prefer not to have a general anaesthetic. In these cases a local anaesthetic injection to make the groin numb or a spinal anaesthetic, to make the patient numb from the waist down, may be suitable. Your surgeon will advise you whether a local anaesthetic procedure is appropriate for you.

How is the operation performed?
Before your operation you will meet your surgeon. They will examined you, mark your hernia, and explain the operation in detail.

If you are having your operation under local anaesthetic your surgeon will inject local anaesthetic in and around the hernia. This will numb the groin. Your leg may also feel a little heavy. The local anaesthetic will last for about 2 hours and then sensation will slowly return.

A cut is made in the groin near the bulge, and the weakness in the muscle identified. Any hole is closed with stitches and strengthened with a mesh. This gauze mesh, which is like a child's fishing net, stays in the body and encourages scar tissue to form. This scar tissue ensures the hernia repair stays strong. As you are awake you may be aware of some pulling sensation in the groin during the repair. This is normal but if the sensations become too strong then additional local anaesthetic will be offered. During the operation you may be asked to cough a few times to test the hernia repair. Dissolving stitches are usually used for the skin.

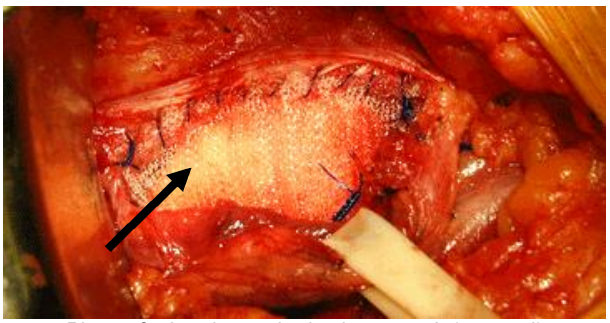

Photo of a hernia repaired using a mesh (arrowed)

How long am I in hospital?
After a local anaesthetic operation most people are able to walk out of the operating theatre and can go home later that day.

What is the success rate of the operation?
Hernia operations are very successful when performed by trained specialist surgeons. The chance of a hernia coming back (a recurrence) is less than 2%. Hernias are more likely to return in patients with infections or in those who do too much heavy lifting too quickly.

What are the risks or complications?
The risk of the hernia recurring is less than 2%. Groin hernia operations may cause some bleeding and bruising near the scar. Your leg and groin may feel stiff and uncomfortable for a few weeks after the operation. A few patients (less than 1%) experience long-term groin pain. This may need further tests or investigations.

What can I do afterwards?
As a rule - "in the first month, if you can't lift it easily with one hand, you shouldn't lift it at all". In the first four weeks you should take gentle exercise (walking) as stiffness permits. After a month you can start more demanding exercise although you must build up to full strength gradually. Most people need one or two weeks off work after a hernia operation. Patients with strenuous manual work may need 4-6 weeks before they can return to full duties.

When can I drive after a hernia operation?
Do not drive for 24 hours after a general anaesthetic. You need to be able to do an emergency stop without pain to drive safely. This usually takes 1-2 weeks after a groin hernia operation.

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