Questions to Ask if Considering Heart Surgery

What to ask your cardiologist

- What is coronary artery disease? How many heart vessels are blocked?
- What are my treatment options and what are the risks and benefits of each?
- Why are you recommending this treatment over the others?
- What lifestyle changes will I need to make and what community resources are available to help?
- If I decide not to have open-heart surgery, will you support my decision?
- Will I be given some time to put my affairs in order prior to the heart surgery?
- Should I complete an Advance Directive?
- Should I avoid caffeine and other stimulants for 48 hours prior to surgery?
- (If diabetic) How often should I be monitoring my blood sugar?
- If I opt to have surgery, will I need to take medication afterwards? If so, for how long?

What to ask your heart surgeon

- What are the risks and complications associated with this surgery?
- What are my specific risks? How risky is my surgery?
- Did I have a heart attack? If so, how will this affect my surgery?
- How many other (men / women) have you operated on with my same condition and what were their outcomes?
- How many patients do you operate on each year? How many of your patients were women?
- Can my chest and leg scars be minimized or can vessels be taken from a less visible location?
- How long is my expected recovery? When will I be able to resume normal activities? Drive a car? Return to work? Have sex? Be independent in activities of daily living? Make plans for help in the home for the first two weeks following your discharge from the hospital. Ask for a social service referral to help assist your family with sharing duties.
- What is your fee? Will you accept my insurance as payment in full?
- If I decide not to have blood products administered, does the hospital follow Bloodless Care Protocols?
- What accommodations are available for my family’s stay on the hospital campus so that they can support me throughout the operation?
- When will you be available to answer some of my concerns about the operation?

Tell your heart surgeon

- If you want bloodless care;
- If you want your Advance Directives postponed during surgery. This is the usual procedure. It will be reinstated after you are stable and transferred to intensive care;
- If you have had a vein stripping operation. The doctor will need to look elsewhere for vessels;
- If you would like to hear reassurances during the operation that “all is going well”;
- If you would like to employ holistic measures to help you relax, for example therapeutic massage, aroma therapy, reflexology, bio-feedback or music therapy.
- If you would like to play a relaxing CD during the surgery. You may need to bring in your own headphones and CD player, but this may be well worth the trouble.

Things to discuss with your anesthesiologist

Report any history that could affect how you respond to anesthesia, for example…

- History of panic attacks;
- Experiencing chest pains not related to activity;
- Taking medication for anxiety;
- Excessive, binge or weekend drinking;
- Taking herbal supplements;
- If you or a family member (blood relative) has ever had a serious reaction to anesthesia;
- If you have a drug allergy or sensitivity or you are allergic to latex.

List drug allergies here:

Note Some insurers cover Dr. Dean Ornish’s Heart Disease Reversal Program. Call your insurer to find out if this care option is available to you.

Ask for a visit from your minister or from the hospital’s pastoral care department to help organize a family prayer session for you. Ask if your church community has a prayer network that you could be a recipient of. Whenever considering surgery, it is always wise to get a second opinion. If you don’t feel that surgery is right for you, listen to your heart. Trust your instincts. The decision to have surgery is yours alone.

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