Laparotomy
A laparotomy is a surgical incision into the abdominal cavity. A laparotomy is performed to examine the abdominal organs and aid diagnosis of any problems.

Possible complications include infection and the formation of scar tissue within the abdominal cavity. An alternative to laparotomy is laparoscopy ("keyhole surgery"), where small incisions are made through which to explore the abdominal cavity. Recovery time is greatly reduced with this method.

A laparotomy is a surgical incision (cut) into the abdominal cavity. This operation is performed to examine the abdominal organs and aid diagnosis of any problems, including abdominal pain. In many cases, the problem – once identified – can be fixed during the laparotomy. In other cases, a second operation is required. Another name for laparotomy is abdominal exploration.

Surgical investigation of abdominal pain

A common reason for a laparotomy is to investigate abdominal pain, but the procedure may be required for a broad range of indications. The abdominal organs include the digestive tract (such as the stomach, liver and intestines) and the organs of excretion (such as the kidneys and bladder). Your surgeon may need to operate to find out the exact cause of your complaint. For example, they may need to pinpoint the cause of internal bleeding in the digestive tract or find out where your bowel may be perforated (burst), before treatment can commence.

Medical issues to consider

Before your operation, your doctor or surgeon will:

- Ask about your medical and surgical history and any lifestyle factors (such as current medications, or history of smoking) that may affect your operation
- Explain the operation and discuss with you the possibility of further surgery once the diagnosis is made
- Inform you about any procedures leading up to the operation (pre-operative) and what to expect following the operation. You will be asked to consent to the operation
- Conduct tests like x-rays and blood tests.

Immediately before the operation

Before the operation, you can expect:

- You will be shaved in the abdominal area.
- You may be given a surgical scrub lotion to use in the shower and a theatre gown to wear.
- You may be given an enema or some other form of bowel preparation to help empty your bowels.
- An anaesthetist will check that you are fit for the operation and take note of any allergies you may have.
- You will have ‘nil by mouth’ (nothing to eat) for a number of hours beforehand.

Laparotomy procedure

A laparotomy is performed under general anaesthesia. The surgeon makes a single cut through the skin and muscle of the abdomen, so that the underlying organs can be clearly viewed. The exposed organs are then carefully examined. Once diagnosed, the problem may be fixed on the spot (for example, a perforated bowel may be repaired). In other cases, a second operation may be needed. Once the laparotomy is complete, the muscle of the abdominal wall and the overlying skin are sutured (sewn) closed.

Immediately after the operation

After the operation, you can expect:

- Your temperature, pulse, respiration, blood pressure and wound site are carefully monitored.
- You may have a drain inserted at the wound site.
- A small tube may have been passed through your nose and into your stomach to help drain stomach secretions for a day or two. This rests your digestive tract as...

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A urinary catheter may be inserted to drain off urine. You are given intravenous fluids (directly into the vein), as you may not be allowed to eat for a few days. Pain relief should be given regularly, as ordered by your doctor, to keep you comfortable. As soon as possible, you are encouraged to do your deep breathing and leg exercises. You are assisted out of bed the day after the operation (all going well). Early walking is important, as it reduces the risks of blood clots and chest infections. You are given daily wound care and observation, along with advice on caring for your wound at home. Medication is given to you on discharge.

Possible complications

Possible complications of laparotomy include:

- Haemorrhage (bleeding)
- Infection
- Damage to internal organs
- Formation of internal scar tissue (adhesions)
- Bowel blockages or abdominal pain, which may be caused by adhesions.

Taking care of yourself at home

Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Try to rest as much as possible for two weeks.
- Arrangements should be made for relatives or friends to help you around the house. You need to strictly avoid any heavy lifting, pulling or pushing.
- You may need a modified diet following discharge from hospital. Follow all dietary suggestions.
- Make sure you take your medications and follow instructions precisely.
- Continue with any exercises you were shown in hospital.
- Report to your doctor immediately if your wound becomes inflamed, tender or starts to discharge. These symptoms could indicate infection.

Long-term outlook

Recuperation time following laparotomy is usually six weeks, but may vary depending on whether other procedures are performed at the same time. As with any post-operative recovery, it is important to always consult your doctor. Make sure you have a final check-up.

Other forms of diagnosis

An alternative to laparotomy is laparoscopy, or 'keyhole surgery'. Laparoscopy examines the inside of the abdominal or pelvic cavity using a slender tube (laparoscope) inserted through a small incision (cut). The laparoscope contains fibre-optic camera heads or surgical heads (or both). Before laparoscopy was available, doctors always had to make large openings and cut through layers of tissue in order to examine internal organs. Laparoscopy greatly reduces the patient’s recovery time, but is not appropriate in all cases.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Surgeon

Things to remember

- A laparotomy is a surgical incision into the abdominal cavity.
- A laparotomy is performed to examine the abdominal organs and aid diagnosis of any problems.
- Possible complications include infection and the formation of scar tissue within the abdominal cavity.
- An alternative to laparotomy is laparoscopy ("keyhole surgery"), where small incisions are made through which to explore the abdominal cavity. Recovery time is greatly reduced with this method.

References

- Laparotomy, exploratory definition, Encyclopaedia of surgery, More information here.

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More information

Surgery
Types of surgery

- **Brain surgery**
  
  Brain surgery is performed for a number of reasons, including alterations in brain tissue, brain blood flow and cerebrospinal fluid...

- **Day surgery and anaesthesia**
  
  Day surgery is completed in one day, usually the person does not have to stay in hospital overnight...

- **General anaesthetics**
  
  An anaesthetic is a drug or agent that produces a complete or partial loss of feeling...

- **Surgery**
  
  Ask your doctor or surgeon about the benefits, risks and possible side effects of surgery...

Exploratory surgery

- **Arthroscopy**
  
  Most people can resume normal activities around three weeks after an arthroscopy...

- **Biopsy**
  
  Before a biopsy, you need to discuss a range of issues with your doctor or surgeon...

- **Colonoscopy**
  
  A colonoscopy can be used to look for cancer of the colon (bowel cancer) or colon polyps, which are growths on the lining of the colon...

- **Laparoscopy**
  
  The advantage of laparoscopy is that only a small incision is required, which is why it is also known as 'keyhole surgery'...

Blood, tissue and organ donation

- **Blood donation**
  
  Donated blood is used to help people who are sick or injured, or for medical research...

- **Blood transfusion**
  
  Donated blood is screened for blood-borne diseases such as hepatitis, syphilis and HIV...

- **Corneal transplantation and donation**
  
  Corneal transplant surgery would not be possible without generous donors and their families, who have donated corneal tissue so that others may see...

- **Kidney donation**
  
  Kidneys are often donated after death but more people are choosing to donate one of their kidneys while still alive (living kidney donation)...

- **Organ and tissue donation**
  
  Discover the facts about organ and tissue donation, decide about becoming a donor and discuss your decision with the people close to you...

- **Organ and tissue transplantation**
  
  Transplantation varies depending on the transplant organ or tissue so speak with your medical team about surgical procedures, recovery and medications...

Plastic and cosmetic

- **Abdominoplasty (tummy tuck)**
  
  A 'tummy tuck', or abdominoplasty, is cosmetic surgery to remove fat and excess loose skin from the abdomen...

- **Blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery)**

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Eyelid surgery, or blepharoplasty, aims to improve the appearance of the upper eyelids, lower eyelids or both.

- Body contouring surgery
  Body contouring surgery is to remove sagging skin and extra fat, and improve the shape and tone of underlying tissue.

- Brachioplasty (arm lift surgery)
  An ‘arm lift’ is surgery to reshape or reconstruct the underside of the upper arm from the armpit to the elbow.

- Breast implants (augmentation)
  Breast implants are inserted under the skin to create larger breasts.

- Breast reduction for men
  Breast reduction for men is surgery to correct overdeveloped or enlarged breasts.

- Breast reduction for women
  Breast reduction surgery removes excess breast fat, glandular tissue and skin to achieve a breast size in proportion with your body.

- Brow lift
  A brow lift is cosmetic surgery to correct a sagging forehead and repair frown lines.

- Cosmetic genital surgery - labiaplasty and phalloplasty
  Cosmetic genital surgery involves reshaping the labia, vulva or penis to alter their size or shape.

- Cosmetic implants - buttock, fat and pectoral
  Buttock and pectoral implants involve surgery to insert shaped silicone pieces into skin cavities.

- Cosmetic surgery
  Cosmetic surgery carries risks and, in some cases, the results are not what you may anticipate.

- Cosmetic treatments - injectables
  Cosmetic injections into the skin can be used to reduce wrinkles.

- Ears - otoplasty
  Ear correction surgery, or otoplasty, is usually done to move prominent ears closer to the head or to reduce the size of large ears.

- Facelift (meloplasty)
  A facelift is a type of cosmetic surgery that removes or tightens facial skin to make a person look younger.

- Facial implants
  Facial implants are used by people who want to restore or improve the normal shape of their face.

- Hair transplant surgery
  Hair transplant surgery involves taking skin from parts of the scalp where hair is growing and grafting it to the thinning or bald areas, or areas of trauma.

- Liposuction
  Liposuction is invasive surgery and is not a substitute for weight reduction or a cure for obesity.

- Medical tourism and insurance
  People may choose to travel overseas to seek medical or surgical treatment that is unavailable in their home country. This is called medical tourism, and it’s a booming industry worldwide. People...

- Nose - rhinoplasty
  Rhinoplasty may be performed for cosmetic reasons or to correct a structural problem.

Reproductive and contraception

- Assisted reproductive technology – IVF and ICSI
  IVF (in-vitro-fertilization) and ICSI (intracytoplasmic sperm injection) are assisted reproductive treatment (ART) procedures in which fertilisation of an egg occurs outside the body.

- Caesarean section
  A caesarean section is usually performed when it is safer for the mother or the baby than a vaginal birth.
• Contraception - tubal ligation
  Sterilisation is a permanent method of contraception that a woman can choose if she is sure that she does not want children in the future...

• Contraception - vasectomy
  Having a vasectomy does not affect a man's ability to produce male sex hormones, enjoy sex or reach orgasm...

• Dilatation and curettage (D&C)
  A dilatation and curettage (D&C) is an operation performed on women to lightly scrape away the womb lining...

• Hysterectomy
  The conditions that prompt a hysterectomy can often be treated by other means, and hysterectomy should only be a last resort...

A-Z of surgical procedures

• Abdominoplasty (tummy tuck)
  A 'tummy tuck', or abdominoplasty, is cosmetic surgery to remove fat and excess loose skin from the abdomen...

• Appendectomy
  An appendectomy is usually carried out on an emergency basis to treat appendicitis...

• Brachioplasty (arm lift surgery)
  An 'arm lift' is surgery to reshape or reconstruct the underside of the upper arm from the armpit to the elbow...

• Brain surgery
  Brain surgery is performed for a number of reasons, including alterations in brain tissue, brain blood flow and cerebrospinal fluid...

• Breast reconstruction and mastectomy
  Some women choose to have breast reconstruction surgery to give a similar appearance to the look of their original breast in normal clothes...

• Cosmetic implants - buttock, fat and pectoral
  Buttock and pectoral implants involve surgery to insert shaped silicone pieces into skin cavities...

• Craniotomy
  A craniotomy is an operation to open the skull (cranium) in order to access the brain for surgical repair...

• Eyes - laser eye surgery
  During laser eye surgery, a computer-controlled laser is used to remove microscopic amounts of tissue from the front surface of the eye...

• Hair transplant surgery
  Hair transplant surgery involves taking skin from parts of the scalp where hair is growing and grafting it to the thinning or bald areas, or areas of trauma...

• Heart bypass surgery
  After heart bypass surgery, eat a wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals and cold-water fish...

• Heart disease - angioplasty and stent procedures (video)
  People with coronary heart disease talk about the medical procedures that followed their heart attack and diagnosis...

• Kidneys - dialysis and transplant
  People with kidney failure need dialysis or a transplant to stay alive...

• Knee replacement surgery
  Knee replacement surgery removes a diseased knee joint and replaces it with an artificial joint...

• Laminectomy
  A laminectomy is a surgical incision into the vertebra to obtain access to the spinal cord...

• Laparotomy
  A laparotomy is a surgical incision into the abdominal cavity used to examine the abdominal organs and aid diagnosis...

• Myomectomy
  A myomectomy is an operation performed to remove fibroids from the uterus...
Obesity surgery

Obesity surgery is not a form of cosmetic surgery, nor an alternative to good eating habits and regular exercise...

Tracheostomy

A tracheostomy is a surgical procedure that involves making a cut in the trachea (windpipe) and inserting a tube into the opening...

Transurethral resection of the prostate (TURP) - for benign prostate disease

Surgery on the prostate gland can have many side effects, including erectile problems and urinary incontinence...

Related Information

Endoscopy

An endoscope or fibrescope is a long, usually flexible tube with a lens at one end and a video camera at the other...

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Most people can resume normal activities around three weeks after an arthroscopy...

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A colonoscopy can be used to look for cancer of the colon (bowel cancer) or colon polyps, which are growths on the lining of the colon...

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Home

Related information on other websites

- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Abdominal exploration.

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