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Awareness during anaesthesia

> **The short version.** Awareness is uncommon, and being aware *and in pain* is much rarer still. It is one of the rare risks I will discuss with you before your operation, and if it happens it is recorded, reviewed and treated seriously.

What awareness means

General anaesthesia is not a single switch. It is a state maintained by drugs that are adjusted continuously. Awareness means that some memory or perception of the operation persists afterwards. In most reported cases this is brief — sounds, voices, a feeling of movement, or a dream-like impression — rather than pain. Being awake, paralysed and in pain is the version people fear most, and it is the rarest.

How often it happens

The best figures come from the **Fifth National Audit Project (NAP5)** of the Royal College of Anaesthetists, which estimated that awareness during general anaesthesia, as reported by patients, occurs in roughly **one in 19,000** general anaesthetics. When a muscle relaxant was used — so the patient could not move or signal — the estimate was about **one in 8,000**; when no muscle relaxant was used, about **one in 136,000**. Most reported episodes did not involve pain.

What is done to prevent it

- Anaesthetic depth is judged continuously by clinical signs, and by measuring the concentration of anaesthetic gas in your breath.
- For people at higher risk, a depth-of-anaesthesia monitor is used as an additional check.
- Avoiding muscle relaxants where they are not needed, so that movement can signal lighter anaesthesia.
- Higher-risk situations are planned for: cardiac surgery, emergency caesarean section, major trauma, a difficult airway, long operations, and situations where keeping the blood pressure stable means giving less anaesthetic.

If it happens

Tell me, or tell your surgeon or GP, so it can be documented and reviewed. You will be offered a conversation about what happened, and referral to a psychologist or specialist service if you want it — the distress can be significant and it responds to support. It is also reported through the hospital's incident system, which is how practice improves.

> **Tell me before the operation if:** you have experienced awareness before, you have had a caesarean section or cardiac surgery under general anaesthetic before, you take regular

> sedatives, opioids or heavy alcohol, or you are specifically anxious about this. Being able to tell me makes a difference to how I plan and monitor your anaesthetic.

Awareness is listed by the college as one of the rare adverse effects that patients should be warned about for general anaesthesia, alongside anaphylaxis, neurological damage and death in otherwise healthy people.

On your phone: anaesthesia.herman.au/p/12
Prepared by Dr Herman Lim for patients of his anaesthetic practice · version 1.0, 27 November 2026.
Awareness as a rare adverse effect requiring disclosure: ANZCA **PS26(A) Position statement on informed consent for anaesthesia or sedation (2021)**. Frequency figures are the NAP5 estimates (Royal College of Anaesthetists, 2014), not an ANZCA statement.
This pamphlet is general information and does not replace individual advice. If my rooms, your surgeon or your hospital have given you different instructions, **those instructions take priority** over anything written here.

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