

Questions to ask before you agree to heart surgery

A practical list of questions that turns a frightening conversation into a plan you can hold on to.

Choosing treatment

Educational draft. Clinical review pending. Quotations retained from the original text are not verified member testimonials.

This article is a checklist — a set of plain questions you can take into your next conversation with the heart team, so you do not have to think on your feet while your head is spinning.

The moment someone says “surgery,” the room goes quiet. Your mind fills with questions, and the ones you actually want to ask rarely come out in the right order — or at all. That is not a failure of courage. It is simply what happens to almost everyone. This list is here so the questions have somewhere to live until you need them.

Start with the big three

1. “Why do I need this now?” — Ask what the surgery is protecting you from, and what your life looks like over the next few years with it and without it.
2. “What exactly will you do?” — Ask your doctor to walk you through the operation as if you were watching it: where the cut is, which vessels are involved, what gets bypassed or replaced.
3. “What happens if we wait — or decide not to do it at all?” — There is usually a range of options, not a single yes or no. Knowing the range helps you feel less cornered.

Questions about your body and your risk

- What are the risks for someone with my other conditions — my diabetes, my kidneys, my lungs?
- What is my honest risk of stroke, infection, bleeding, or the operation not working?

- What do you do, step by step, to lower those risks?
- If something goes wrong, who is in the room, and who explains it to my family?

Questions about recovery and real life

- How long will I be in hospital, and how long before I can drive, work, lift, and travel?
- What will the pain feel like, and how will it be managed?
- What will I not be able to do — and for how long?
- When will we know the operation worked?
- What will my medications and check-ups look like after I go home? (Ask about them — never change anything on your own.)

Questions about the team

- Who actually performs the surgery, and who covers when that person is unavailable?
- Who do I call at night with a problem?
- Who sits with my family and explains things in plain language?

How to use this list

You do not need to read it all out loud. Before your appointment, circle the five questions that scare you most. Bring someone you trust to take notes — memory fails everyone after bad news, and the notes become your memory. Ask the same question twice if the answer did not land. A good team is never bothered by that.

Take it to your team

Print or screenshot this page. Circle the questions you most want answered and hand it to your doctor or nurse at the start of the visit. It is a gift to them, not an insult: it tells them exactly what matters to you. You can also ask: "If you were in my chair, which three of these would you most want answered?"

Call for help if

While you are waiting for an appointment or a decision: new or worsening chest pain or pressure that does not settle, breathlessness at rest, fainting, or a feeling that something is wrong. Do not wait for the appointment. These symptoms deserve a call for help now, day or night.

Whatever you decide — and whenever you decide it — this decision belongs to you and your own medical team. No article can make it for you, and none should. Take these questions to your team, let them answer in their own words, and choose from there.

Questions to take to my team

☐ What are the risks for someone with my other conditions — my diabetes, my kidneys, my lungs?

☐ What is my honest risk of stroke, infection, bleeding, or the operation not working?

☐ What do you do, step by step, to lower those risks?

☐ If something goes wrong, who is in the room, and who explains it to my family?

☐ How long will I be in hospital, and how long before I can drive, work, lift, and travel?

☐ What will the pain feel like, and how will it be managed?

☐ What will I not be able to do — and for how long?

☐ When will we know the operation worked?

☐ Who actually performs the surgery, and who covers when that person is unavailable?

☐ Who do I call at night with a problem?

☐ Who sits with my family and explains things in plain language?

☐ What medicines and tests will I need after discharge?

☐ Which three questions would you prioritize if you were in my position?

☐ Why do I need this operation now?

☐ What exactly will you do during the operation?

☐ What happens if we wait or decide not to proceed?

For discussion and personal reference. Your care team's individual instructions take priority. For an emergency, contact your local emergency service; do not wait for a community reply.