

PATIENT INFORMATION

What is surgical mesh?

Surgical mesh is used to support or replace body tissue that has become weak or is no longer there. There are many types of surgical mesh, some of which are used in rectal prolapse and rectocele surgery. Some are absorbed by the body, leaving behind scar tissue that supports the lower bowel (“absorbable” meshes). Others are not absorbed and stay permanently where they are placed (“permanent meshes”). Yet others are made from animal tissue, usually pig skin, and are designed to become part of the body’s normal tissue over time (“biological” meshes).

What are the advantages of using surgical mesh?

Surgical mesh has been used for more than a century to repair hernias (ruptures) in the abdomen and has a good safety record when used for this purpose. Nowadays, mesh is also widely used in other types of surgery, including for rectal prolapse, to strengthen tissues that have become weak. Simply stitching the body tissue may not be enough, meaning that the prolapse will return. Use of mesh provides lifelong strength to the weakened tissue and makes it less likely that you will need prolapse surgery again in the future.

Are there any disadvantages of using surgical mesh?

Any artificial material has disadvantages when inserted into the body. Not all meshes are the same, and some seem less likely to cause problems than others. Broadly speaking, the disadvantages depend on whether the mesh is permanent or absorbable.

Rarely, the mesh may wear through the tissues over time and protrude through the wall of the bowel. This is called “erosion” and can occur many years after the mesh has been put in. Erosion may need complicated surgery to remove parts or all of the mesh.

Absorbable mesh is much less likely to wear and protrude through the bowel over time. However, the risk of the prolapse coming back over time is higher with an absorbable mesh.

Your surgeon will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using mesh in your operation with you and explain the mesh best suited for your prolapse. Rectal prolapse is not a life-threatening condition, so the risk of a complication from the mesh needs to be weighed carefully against the bother you are getting from your prolapse. Surgeons are careful when selecting patients for a permanent mesh implant and only use one when they believe it to be necessary and expect it to be safe.

What can be done to reduce the risk of a complication if my rectal operation includes surgical mesh?

As with any surgery, there is a risk of infection when using mesh for a rectal operation. At the start of the operation, an antibiotic is given to reduce the risk of the mesh becoming infected. Smokers have a higher risk of complications after most types of surgery, including mesh erosion after a rectal operation. Stopping smoking can reduce this risk.

How will I know if there is a problem with my mesh?

If a problem does occur, the symptoms can be vague. This means that they could be caused by something other than the mesh. If you are worried about your symptoms, you should be seen by your specialist, even if it has been many years since your operation. Problems with mesh can be difficult to spot and you should be seen at a specialist pelvic floor centre.

Use of mesh for a rectal operation can cause symptoms such as:

- Pain in the lower pelvic area
- Discharge or bleeding from the bowel or vagina
- Pain during sex for you or your partner
- Frequent urinary tract infections
- Worsening problems with having to rush to the toilet or going to the toilet more often to urinate.

If you have concerns at any time after your operation, you should discuss them with your surgeon. If the surgeon thinks your symptoms could be caused by the mesh, you can expect him/her to:

- Explain the diagnosis and treatment necessary to you in a way that you can understand
- Report the complication to the relevant health authority (in the UK, this is the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) in a way that protects your medical confidentiality.

The Pelvic Floor Society has set up a national mesh database for surgeons to enter their data so that patients who have mesh inserted as part of a prolapse operation can be monitored. You will be asked to give your consent before any information about your case is placed on the database.

Should I be worried if I have had surgical mesh inserted in the past?

Most people never have a problem with their mesh. If you have no symptoms to suggest a problem, there is no need to worry. However, if you are concerned, you should contact the surgeon who performed your operation. If this is no longer possible, speak to your GP and ask to see another specialist.

What do other doctors/organisations think about surgical mesh?

Even though mesh has been used safely in many thousands of hernia repairs, surgeons have had concerns about the possible complications of surgical mesh when used for other purposes. These concerns are more to do with repairs for vaginal prolapse than for rectal prolapse, but there are some similarities in the complications that can occur. Some very large studies suggest that the risk of developing an infection or erosion may be up to 2 in every 100 cases when mesh is used to repair an internal or external rectal prolapse. There are ongoing studies monitoring this risk.

Checklist of questions to ask your doctor before having surgical mesh inserted

Please ask your surgeon the following questions before having an operation that involves mesh:

- What are the pros and cons of using mesh in my case?
- Could the operation be done without mesh?
 - What type of mesh would you use?
 - What is your experience of using mesh?
 - What experience have your other patients had with this product?
 - What is your experience of dealing with complications from this product?
 - What should I expect to feel after my operation and for how long?
 - Are there any specific things that I should let you know about after my surgery?
 - What happens if the mesh doesn't help my problem?
 - If I have a complication, can the mesh be removed and what would the consequences be?
 - Is there a patient information leaflet that comes with the product? Can I have a copy?

You should let your doctor know if you have had a reaction to the materials used in surgical mesh in the past, for example, if you have an allergy to polypropylene.

Other sources of information

The Pelvic Floor Society website (<http://thepelvicfloorsociety.co.uk>) has a statement about the use of surgical mesh in rectal surgery, including patient information about other procedures used to treat rectal prolapse and rectocele. Information about medical devices, including mesh, is available from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (www.mhra.gov.uk). The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) also has guidelines about use of surgical mesh for prolapse (www.nice.org.uk).

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