

ASA Statement on Anesthesia Awareness

- Anesthesia awareness, also known as “intraoperative awareness” is an *uncommon* condition that occurs when surgical patients under general anesthesia can recall their surroundings, an event or even pain related to their surgery.
- Incidences of awareness occur once or twice per thousand surgeries performed with general anesthesia. These statistics include reported mild events that lasted only a few seconds. When awareness occurs, it is often just prior to the general anesthetic taking effect or as the patient is emerging from the anesthesia.
- The risk for experiencing anesthesia awareness is higher for unstable patients or for patients undergoing high-risk surgeries such as trauma, cardiac surgery or emergency caesarean sections. In these high-risk cases, using a deep anesthetic may not be in the best interest for patient safety.
- Recent studies indicate that with vigilant patient monitoring, cases of awareness are as low as 1 in 14,000 surgeries and 1 in 42,000 surgeries that are not high risk.
- Regardless of the statistics, the American Society of Anesthesiologists believes that even one case of anesthesia awareness is too many. As patient advocates, anesthesiologists are the leaders in patient safety and provide continual medical assessment of patients during surgery, maintaining pain levels and surgical conditions. Anesthesiologists are the physicians that monitor and control the patient’s heart rate and rhythm, breathing, blood pressure, body temperature and body fluid balance throughout surgery.
- Patients should meet with their anesthesiologist prior to surgery to discuss their anesthesia options as well as their surgical, anesthetic and medication history. Patients should also discuss any anxiety or concerns about their procedure.
- If a patient believes that they may have experienced awareness during surgery, they should talk to their anesthesiologist as soon as possible following surgery to ensure investigation of all possible claims.
- Experts in anesthesiology continue to study anesthesia awareness, seeking the most effective ways to prevent the condition. Brain-wave monitoring devices are currently undergoing rigorous tests to evaluate their effectiveness in detecting awareness. As new technology is evaluated, the expertise of highly trained anesthesiologists remains the best patient safety monitor.
- Vigilance on the part of the entire surgical staff is key before, during and after surgery to ensure the safety and recovery of each patient.
- Patients should NEVER get their medical information from movies or fictional television shows.