

Splenectomy

What is the Spleen?

The spleen is an organ found in the upper left part of the abdomen. The spleen helps to filter germs out of the blood stream. People who are without a spleen are at slightly increased risk for significant, potentially life-threatening infections.

Why is the Spleen removed?

People have their spleens removed (splenectomy) due to illness or injury. Strong blows to the abdomen can cause the spleen to crack. These cracks have a tendency to bleed, sometimes significantly. Injuries to the spleen are graded based on their severity with a Grade 1 being the least severe and a Grade 5 the most severe. The severity of the injury, in conjunction with the patient's vital signs and laboratory work, guides the decision of whether or not to surgically remove the spleen. An injured spleen can be the source of life-threatening bleeding and hence must be removed in the appropriate clinical setting. In the setting of trauma, the spleen is usually removed through a large incision in the middle of the abdomen.

What is the risk of not having a Spleen?

While the immune system can defend against most bacteria and viruses without a spleen, patients are at risk for particular overwhelming infections from bugs classified as "encapsulated bacteria". These bacteria have a tough "shell", making their destruction by the immune system difficult.

What can I do to reduce my risk of infection?

Immunization against these encapsulated bacteria decreases the risk of significant infection. Most patients will be immunized prior to discharge from the hospital. Three separate immunizations are recommended for patients without spleens. These include:

- Pneumococcus: A bacteria which commonly causes pneumonia. At least one booster is recommended 5 years after the initial vaccination.
- Haemophilus Influenza (HIB): A bacteria which commonly causes pneumonia and meningitis (infection of the lining around the brain and spinal cord).
- Meningococcus: A bacteria which commonly causes meningitis.

If at any point, fevers or any other signs or symptoms of infection (sore throat, productive cough) are demonstrated, seek medical care and notify them that you have had your spleen removed. A course of antibiotics will generally be prescribed. Animal and tick bites, no matter how minimal, should also be discussed with a physician.

Without a spleen, travel to foreign countries increases the risk for contracting malaria and meningitis. Consult with a physician before traveling and take a course of antibiotics with you when traveling to "at-risk" countries.