

Article 813

## **Overview**

An abdominal exploration, or laparotomy, is a surgical procedure that allows a surgeon to look inside the abdominal cavity.

## **Who is a candidate for the procedure?**

An exploratory laparotomy is often done when a person complains of abdominal pain. It can also be performed after an injury to the abdomen. The operation allows the surgeon to examine internal organs. Disease or damage can be uncovered. In some cases, the problem can be corrected during the surgery.

## **How is the procedure performed?**

There are two methods for performing an abdominal exploration:

- » laparoscopy. In this procedure, the surgeon uses a camera on the end of a long tube, called a laparoscope. The laparoscope is inserted through a small incision in the abdomen.
- » laparotomy. This is a surgical procedure in which a large incision is made in the abdomen to allow the surgeon to view the interior directly.

Both procedures require general anesthesia. A medicine is given to put the person to sleep. A tube is inserted through the person's mouth into the windpipe. This is connected to a ventilator, or artificial breathing machine. Once the person is asleep, the surgeon begins the procedure. He or she makes a cut in the skin and enters the abdomen. A large cut is made for a laparotomy. This allows the surgeon to view the organs directly. In a laparoscopy, the surgeon makes several small skin incisions in different parts of the abdomen. A thin tube with a light and camera on the end of it is inserted through one of the small cuts, and the abdominal cavity is inflated with carbon dioxide. This allows the surgeon to see the inside of the abdomen. Surgical tools are inserted through the other incisions. This lets the surgeon move or cut tissues when needed. In both procedures, the surgeon looks at the abdominal organs. These include the intestines, liver, stomach, spleen, and pancreas. If a problem is spotted, the surgeon will often try to fix it at that time.

## **What happens right after the procedure?**

After the operation is over, the person will be taken to the recovery room. It is common for the individual to feel nauseated. There may be discomfort from the incision. Pain is usually greater after a laparotomy. The doctor will prescribe medicines to reduce the nausea and discomfort. After the anesthesia has worn off, the person will return to his or her hospital room to recover. With a laparoscopy, the person can sometimes go home on the same day as the procedure. Sometimes the person may awaken from anesthesia with a small suction tube through the nose into the stomach, allowing the contents of the stomach to be suctioned until the bowels wake up fully.

## **What happens later at home?**

After the procedure, the individual's surgeon will provide specific instructions for recovery at home. Pain medicines are often needed for a few days. The person should slowly increase his or her activity level. He or she should return to a normal diet as soon as it is tolerated. The length of the recovery time needed will depend on which procedure was performed. People undergoing a laparoscopy will be back to their normal activities much sooner. Recovery will also be affected by any problems that were found during the surgery.

## **What are the potential complications after the procedure?**

Surgery can cause bleeding, infection, or allergic reaction to anesthesia. Any new or worsening symptoms should be reported to the healthcare provider.