

Before and During the ICD Implant Procedure

After a virus damaged Maria's heart ten years ago, doctors implanted an implantable cardioverter defibrillator or ICD into her chest. An ICD is a device that shocks the heart when the heart's normal rhythm is disrupted. Maria's a veteran of ICD implants; her unit has been replaced twice as the batteries have worn out.

"The first time it was a little bit intimidating, because you go back into this room that looks like it's right out of Star Trek. It's very high-tech. But after you go through it once, it's really a minor procedure." Maria, Patient

Even though implanting an ICD is considered routine, you'll still have to prepare for the procedure by following pre-surgery instructions.

For one week before your surgery, don't shave near the area where the ICD will be implanted, but you can shower. Your doctor might instruct you to wash the surgery site with a special soap the night before and the morning of your procedure.

Don't eat or drink after midnight the evening before your surgery. However, it's ok to drink small amounts of water to take medication. Your health care provider may have you temporarily stop certain medications.

"It is important to notify your physician of which medications you're taking. There are certain drugs that are not compatible, or should be discontinued prior to a procedure."

- Gabriel Breuer, MD Cardiac Electrophysiologist

Before the procedure, you will be required to sign a consent form. As with any procedure, there are risks associated with implanting an ICD. Among them: infection, severe bleeding, and a collapsed lung.

Maria says discussing her concerns with her healthcare team helped make her feel more prepared.

"Get your questions written down. Ask everything. It's their job to tell you. There's no stupid questions, and there's no questions that you should be embarrassed about."

– Maria, Patient

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ICDs are implanted in either the left or right side of the chest. Your health care team will likely ask which side you prefer.

Like many patients, Donald Williams based his decision on which arm he uses the most.

“I chose the left side because I’m right-handed, and on the left side there’s less movement. I don’t do as much with my left hand.” – Donald, Patient

Before your procedure, you’ll be given medications to relax you and numb the surgical site. In some cases, general anesthesia, which puts you to sleep, may be used.

“They asked me to count. I don’t think I got past 90. 91, 92. Starting at a hundred. I didn’t get past that, I don’t think. And before I knew it, I’m waking up in bed back in my hospital room.” – Donald, Patient

An incision about three inches long will be made near your collarbone in order to form a pocket just under the skin. Here your doctor will implant the pulse generator, which is the power source.

A wire – called a lead -- will be threaded through a vein and into your heart. Depending on your condition, more than one lead may be inserted. Over a period of weeks, the ends of the leads will embed in the heart muscle.

Once the pulse generator and leads are connected, the system is checked to make sure it’s working properly. After the surgical team finishes, they’ll move you to recovery, where you will continue to be monitored.

It’s common for patients to be able to get out of bed just a few hours after the procedure.

“I was walking the day of the surgery. That night in the hospital, I could sit up. I could walk to the chair, so I was up and moving.” – Maria, Patient

However, you may have some discomfort and need to keep your arm in a sling for a while to limit movement.

“When patients undergo insertion of a device, we advise them not to lift the right or left arm depending on where the device is above their shoulder level for approximately six weeks.”

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That is just to make sure that the leads stay in place.”

- Gabriel Breuer, MD Cardiac Electrophysiologist

By following the advice of his health care team, Donald was able to get back to the activities he enjoys relatively quickly.

“I did what I was told, and nothing happened. Everything seems fine, but you do have to follow instructions.” – Donald, Patient