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## Surgeons' Ability to Predict the Extent of Surgery Prior to Cytoreductive Surgery With Hyperthermic Intraperitoneal Chemotherapy

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## **Postoperative neurocognitive disorders**

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## Abstract

A decline in cognitive function is a frequent complication after major surgery. Postoperative cognitive impairments have generally been divided into short (postoperative delirium) and long-term disturbances (postoperative cognitive dysfunction [POCD]). Long-term impairments are often subtle and overlooked. They need to be objectively assessed with neuropsychological tests in order to be diagnosed. Although POCD has been the subject of considerable research over the past decades, it remains uncertain why some patients do not return to preoperative levels of cognitive function. Surgery and anesthesia have both been implicated in playing a role in developing POCD, and certain patient-related factors, such as advanced age and low preoperative baseline cognitive function have consistently been found to predict postoperative cognitive decline. This article will provide an overview of POCD, and its etiology, and provide advice on possible strategies on preventing it.

**Keywords:** Aged; Delirium; Frail elderly; Inflammation; Neurocognitive disorders; Perioperative care; Postoperative cognitive complications.

## 1 **Introduction**

2 It has been over five decades since P.D. Bedford observed that surgery in elderly patients was  
3 followed by a significant cognitive decline that lasted for an extensive period of time [1]. Through  
4 interviews (with patients and relatives) and subjective assessment, he found that 7% of his  
5 (elderly) patients who underwent surgery and received general anesthesia had developed signs of  
6 cognitive impairment. He published these findings in *The Lancet*, concluding that ‘the allegation  
7 "He’s never been the same since his operation " is sometimes true, and that an irreversible gross  
8 dementia is occasionally the aftermath of surgical operations under general anesthesia [1].’

9 By the late 1980s psychometric tests were being used to objectively assess cognitive decline after  
10 surgery, particularly in patients undergoing cardiac surgery [2]. These studies too, consistently  
11 documented long-term cognitive disorder in elderly patients, although with varying incidences and  
12 severity. As a result, the concept postoperative cognitive dysfunction (POCD) developed as a  
13 diagnosis based on these objective measurements. Although surgery and anesthesia have improved  
14 dramatically since then, our exact understanding of when, how and why some patients do not return  
15 to baseline cognitive function remains elusive. As cognitive dysfunction, in the form of delirium  
16 has been shown to be important for perioperative outcome and mortality [3–5], it is also important  
17 to consider the effects of long-term cognitive impairment and its possible risk factors. In this  
18 review, we present a brief overview of POCD and its etiology, and provide advice on possible  
19 strategies on preventing it.

## 21 **Postoperative cognitive impairment; delirium and POCD**

22 Cognitive impairment after surgery is common, particularly in elderly patients. These  
23 impairments have generally been divided into short (delirium) and long-term disturbances  
24 (postoperative cognitive dysfunction [POCD]) [6]. The former is familiar among many clinicians

1 and well-defined according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Medical Disorders (DSM)-5  
2 [7]. It states that delirium consists of impairments in attention, awareness and cognition. Cognition  
3 is considered to be a dynamic state, involving multiple domains such as memory, orientation,  
4 language, visuospatial ability or perception [8]. It fluctuates throughout the day, and is affected by  
5 both endogenous and exogenous factors [9]. The incidence of postoperative delirium is reported to  
6 be between 20–45% of the older adult surgery patients [10,11].

7 The term POCD on the other hand, has been used to refer to any signs of new cognitive  
8 impairment that exceeds the expected length of time needed to recover from the acute effects of  
9 surgery and anesthesia [6,12,13]. Unlike delirium, which is a relatively simple and recognizable  
10 syndrome, POCD is clinically far less apparent as it often only manifests as mild cognitive decline  
11 in one or more cognitive domains [6,14,15]. Furthermore, the DSM-5 does not list POCD as a  
12 diagnosis. In 2018, this prompted an expert panel of scientists and clinicians, The International  
13 Perioperative Cognition Nomenclature Working Group, to address, clarify and give structure to  
14 POCD and other perioperative cognitive impairments, whilst proposing new nomenclature to be  
15 used in relation to these terms [16].

16 This working group stated that all cognitive changes associated with surgery and anesthesia  
17 should be summarized under the term ‘perioperative neurocognitive disorders,’ thus aligning these  
18 impairments with the clinical diagnostic criteria for ‘neurocognitive disorders (NCD)’ already  
19 applied in the DSM-5 [7,16]. The working group recommends assessing POCD at least 30 days  
20 after surgery, at which point most patients are expected to have recovered, physically,  
21 physiologically and emotionally from surgery and hospitalization [16]. If assessed too early, the  
22 effects of POCD may be overshadowed by acute postoperative delirium or by other cognitive  
23 complications that may arise from immobility, sleep deprivation and ongoing pharmacological

1 interventions [2]. When cognitive impairment manifests itself beyond 12 months after surgery,  
2 mild or major [e.g. dementia] Neurocognitive Disorders should be considered over POCD [16].

3 The term ‘delayed neurocognitive recovery’ may be used to describe a cognitive disorder that is  
4 detected within 30 days after surgery when delirium has been excluded. Table 1 summarizes the  
5 recommendations offered by the working group [9,16].

6

### 7 **Assessing POCD**

8 Unlike delirium, the diagnosis POCD has primarily been confined to research. Its diagnosis relies  
9 on objectively measurable cognitive decline assessed with neuropsychological tests [12,13,17].  
10 Subjective reports of cognitive changes by patients or proxies are also relevant, however, most  
11 studies comparing cognitive complaints and neuropsychological test results were unable to find a  
12 significant correlation [13,18]. Certain cognitive functions may be less relevant to a patient’s daily  
13 life, and as such, any dysfunction may be overlooked by the patient. There is no agreed upon  
14 definition for POCD, but it generally refers to impairment of memory, learning, concentration,  
15 attention or psychomotor performance [12,16]. Neuropsychological tests are often specific to one  
16 of these cognitive domains.

17 Neuropsychological tests that were used in a key international multicenter study on POCD (the  
18 International Study of Post-Operative Cognitive Dysfunction, ISPOCD 1) are described in Table 2.  
19 There are a wide variety of neuropsychological tests, which all have different levels of sensitivity,  
20 and reliability. The ISPOCD mostly used written tests. Our research group, however, favors  
21 computerized tests, such as the Cogstate Computerized Cognitive Test Battery ®, because of its  
22 ease of use, versatility and the availability of age-matched control group test data.

23 Certain tests are more vulnerable to the effects of practice, and have a poor test-retest reliability  
24 [9,13,17]. Others, notoriously suffer from floor and ceiling-effects resulting from tests being either



1 too difficult or too easy to detect subtle changes [13]. The method with which these test results are  
2 interpreted also varies throughout literature [2]. Test batteries, consisting of multiple tests are able  
3 to assess various cognitive domains and are recommended as they are able to describe the brain  
4 functions in more detail and sensitivity [2,13]. To measure cognitive decline, investigators should  
5 determine the change between baseline preoperative cognitive function and postoperative cognitive  
6 function. In order to correct for age-related test-retest variability, determining the change in  
7 cognitive function with the use of the reliable change index (RCI) is recommended, as it calculates  
8 this change with reference to the expected change found within an age-matched control group [13].  
9

## 10 **Incidence of POCD**

11 The incidence of POCD ranges from 20 to 50% of older patients 3 months after cardiac surgery  
12 and in 5 to 55% of those undergoing major noncardiac surgeries [12,19–23]. This large variation is  
13 the result of the methodological differences between studies, making comparison of data often  
14 difficult. In addition to the various types of test that may be administered for measuring cognitive  
15 change, the degree of change and cut-offs necessary for determining POCD have also varied  
16 throughout literature. Generally, POCD is divided into mild or major neurocognitive decline, if  
17 testing exhibits a decline of  $> 1$  or  $> 2$  standard deviations of cognitive function compared to  
18 preoperative cognitive performance, respectively. As described above, the timing of tests is also a  
19 known source of variability; the later the cognitive assessment is conducted and the more stringent  
20 statistical criteria for identifying POCD, the lower the reported incidence [13].

21 This point is illustrated by the large multicenter ISPOCD study conducted in 1998, which  
22 observed 1000 patients ( $> 60$  years) undergoing various noncardiac surgeries [12]. A  
23 comprehensive neuropsychological test battery was administered with a strict criterion for POCD.  
24 This study found that 25.8% (95% CI, 23.1–28.5) of patients showed signs of cognitive dysfunction

1 1 week after surgery. Cognitive dysfunction at 3 months after surgery was 9.9% (95% CI, 8.1–  
2 12.0). A later study by Monk et al., found similar incidences of POCD in 365 patients undergoing  
3 noncardiac surgery; 41.4% (95% CI, 36.2–46.7) at discharge and 12.7% (95% CI, 8.9–16.4) at 3  
4 months [23]. A recent systematic review of 24 studies found that the incidence of POCD at 3  
5 months was 11.7% (95% CI 10.9–12.5), although they concluded that major differences in  
6 methodology and definitions accounted for variations in the results [24].

7

## 8 **Pathogenesis of POCD**

9 Despite a growing volume of research concerning POCD, the exact etiology for cognitive decline  
10 after surgery and anesthesia is still not well understood. Surgery-, anesthesia- and patient-related  
11 factors have all been implicated in playing a role in developing POCD, and support for various  
12 hypotheses have changed markedly over the years. Historically, a poor cognitive outcome after  
13 surgery was often regarded to be the consequence of cerebral hypoperfusion and hypoxemia [2,14].  
14 Indeed, inadequate cerebral oxygenation will result in brain damage and cognitive decline.  
15 Although intuitively compelling, no strong evidence has been found in favor of POCD being the  
16 direct consequence of impaired cerebral hemodynamics and oxygenation [2,22,25]. This was also  
17 confirmed by the ISPOCD, which monitored perioperative blood pressure and oxygenation and  
18 showed that POCD occurred in the absence of perioperative hypoxemia or hypotension [12].

19 Factors such as the type and duration of surgery and anesthesia, have also often been presumed to  
20 be associated with the incidence of POCD. However, this has not yet been conclusive. A  
21 comprehensive study by Evered et al. [19] compared the incidence of POCD after coronary  
22 angiography under sedation, total hip replacement and coronary artery bypass graft under general  
23 anesthesia. Interestingly, the incidence of POCD was similar and thus independent of the nature of  
24 surgery or type of anesthesia administered. Furthermore, evidence on whether volatile or

1 intravenous anesthetics may be related to POCD has also been controversial and conflicting [26].  
2 Moreover, other studies have not found any correlation between regional or general anesthesia and  
3 the incidence of POCD, which further supports the argument that the type of anesthesia appears to  
4 be unrelated to the occurrence of POCD [27,28]. It is therefore unlikely that POCD is solely caused  
5 by anesthesia or surgery.

6 A recurring theme and the current rationale for the pathogenesis of cognitive dysfunction  
7 encompasses the role of an inflammatory response to surgery and anesthesia [2,14,25]. It is  
8 commonly known that inflammatory processes, such as those associated with pneumonia or a  
9 urinary tract infection, are regularly accompanied by cognitive decline, particularly in the elderly  
10 [29,30]. Extending this model to postoperative cognitive dysfunction, it is thought that the release  
11 of proinflammatory mediators, triggered by peripheral surgical stress or trauma, may result in an  
12 exaggerated systemic inflammatory response leading to neuroinflammation in vulnerable  
13 individuals [14,25,31]. The release of inflammatory cytokines is known to lead to endothelial  
14 dysfunction, and also the disruption of tight junctions, which results in an increased blood-brain-  
15 barrier (BBB) permeability [25,32]. Consequently, systemic inflammatory cytokines will penetrate  
16 the BBB, triggering neuroinflammation and the activation of the neuronal immune system,  
17 including microglia and astrocytes [25,31,33]. Inflammatory mediators are also produced within  
18 the brain, as a result of peripheral-to-central signaling via humoral and neuronal pathways [34].  
19 The consequences of this immune response are healing, but if excessive, it may also result in further  
20 (cerebral) tissue damage in the form of increased synaptic dysfunction, inhibition of neurogenesis,  
21 and neuronal death [25].

22 In mouse models, surgery caused hippocampal-dependent memory impairment that was  
23 associated with increased expression of plasma cytokines, as well as reactive microgliosis and  
24 interleukin (IL)-1 $\beta$  transcription and expression in the hippocampus [35,36]. By inhibiting IL-1 $\beta$ ,

1 these neuroinflammatory changes were mitigated. Another study showed that tumor necrosis factor  
2 (TNF)- $\alpha$  inhibition was also able to limit the release of IL-1 and prevent neuroinflammation and  
3 cognitive decline in mice [37]. Thus, peripheral surgical injury can result in inflammation and  
4 neuroinflammation. However, interpreting and judging the significance of an inflammatory  
5 markers is challenging, as inflammation is a normal physiological response to injury [25].

6 Generally, inflammation is only harmful when proinflammatory responses outweigh the anti-  
7 inflammatory response. Certain patient-related factors are known to exacerbate proinflammatory  
8 responses or result in some patients being more vulnerable to the effects of inflammation.  
9 Advanced age has been consistently associated with POCD throughout the literature [2,9].  
10 Structural cerebral changes, such as a reduction in grey matter volume and myelinated axon length  
11 are normal changes that occur with aging [25,38]. The normal decline of cognitive function in the  
12 elderly might possibly be further exacerbated by the loss of neuronal dendrite spines, as well as  
13 alterations in synaptic transmission and receptors [39]. Furthermore, blood-brain-barrier  
14 dysfunction has also been found in older patients even in the absence of surgery [40]. This decline  
15 in 'cognitive reserve' may thus explain how elderly patients are more susceptible to effects of  
16 inflammation and therefore neuronal injury. A low preoperative cognitive function, and lower  
17 education level have also been frequently associated with POCD, also suggesting the vulnerability  
18 of a reduced 'cognitive reserve' [2,12,23,41].

19 Predisposing patient factors may also exaggerate an inflammatory response, as a result of  
20 'immune priming' [25]. For instance, normal aging without any comorbidities has been associated  
21 with a low-grade inflammatory activity and increased levels of plasma tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  and  
22 IL-6 compared to younger patients [42]. Elderly patients are also more susceptible for sepsis [43].  
23 It is unsurprising that patients of advanced age may be more likely to develop an exaggerated  
24 inflammatory response as a consequence of surgery. The immune system activation caused by

1 atherosclerosis, or neurogenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, may also prime  
2 individuals to develop an excessive inflammatory response [44,45]. The presence of Alzheimer's  
3 dementia biomarkers in cerebrospinal fluid has been shown to be associated with POCD at 3  
4 months, which has also led to the notion that they may involve similar mechanisms [46].

5 Considering the role of inflammation, several studies have attempted to prevent postoperative  
6 cognitive dysfunction with anti-inflammatory drugs [14,47]. One study on the effects of high-dose  
7 intraoperative dexamethasone administration in cardiac surgery, showed that it did not reduce the  
8 risk of POCD [48]. Furthermore, other studies have found that lidocaine, magnesium and  
9 complement cascade inhibitors also failed to prevent POCD [49–51]. These negative findings and  
10 the understanding that not all elderly patients undergoing major surgery develop POCD or not all  
11 patients with atherosclerosis develop POCD after cardiac surgery, reflects the pathophysiological  
12 complexity of POCD.

## 14 **Prevention of POCD**

15 Although a firm understanding for the causes of POCD is absent, improving cognitive outcome  
16 after surgery remains an important objective for anesthesiologists and surgeons alike. To date, no  
17 pharmacological intervention has convincingly been shown to mitigate the incidence or magnitude  
18 of POCD [14]. Dexmedetomidine, an anesthetic agent with neural anti-inflammatory effects, has  
19 been found to be potentially effective at reducing the incidence of postoperative delirium, however  
20 any evidence that it may be effective at reducing POCD is incomplete [52,53]. Deep sedation has  
21 also been identified as a risk factor for delirium, and several studies have found that measuring the  
22 depth of anesthesia (with electroencephalogram monitors) was effective at reducing postoperative  
23 delirium, however, there is conflicting evidence that POCD can also be prevented with the same  
24 measures [54–58]. If possible, deliriogenic [pre]medications such as benzodiazepines should also

1 be avoided [59,60]. Pain and increased post-operative opioid consumption are known to increase  
2 the risk of delirium and have also been associated with POCD [60]. Although sufficient pain-  
3 management is mandatory, opioid-sparing analgesia may be an effective measure at alleviating  
4 some of this risk. Early postoperative mobilization, and a fast-track postoperative approach may  
5 help in this respect [61].

6 Generally, for [non-pharmacological] preventive measures to be significantly effective, multiple  
7 (interdisciplinary) interventions, covering various domains, should be considered [2,9,14]. Patients  
8 with a possible high risk for POCD should be identified preoperatively and cognitively assessed.  
9 When possible, predisposing factors should be modified and adjusted so that patients are  
10 sufficiently prepared for surgery. Preparing patients, and their relatives, adequately by informing  
11 them about possible postoperative cognitive changes is also beneficial [62]. Extended periods of  
12 preoperative fasting and dehydration should be avoided, as should unnecessary postponement of  
13 surgery [63]. Peri-and postoperative patient (re)orientation is essential. Encouraging patients to  
14 wear their glasses and hearing aids, and early removal of catheters and lines are known to be  
15 effective at reducing postoperative delirium, and will help orientate patients and mobilize them  
16 earlier, which may likely be effective at preventing POCD [60].

17 Numerous novel approaches that have been shown to improve cognitive function in older adults  
18 have also been proposed as possible interventions that may prevent, or protect patients against  
19 postoperative cognitive dysfunction. These proposed interventions involve diet interventions,  
20 physical exercise programs, and brain stimulation and cognitive training [14,64]. Although these  
21 strategies are known to improve overall cognition, few of them have been investigated as potential  
22 and feasible interventions for POCD [2]. One study by Kawano et al. [65] found that preoperative  
23 environmental enrichment (PEE), consisting of both cognitive and physical activity, was able to  
24 attenuate neuroinflammation and improve cognitive function in old rats after abdominal surgery. In

1 humans, there is some evidence that preoperative physical status may improve postoperative  
2 morbidity, however, cognitive advantages, if any, are not yet known [66,67]. Nonetheless, for  
3 treatments for cognitive decline there appears to be some potential in improving lifestyle-based  
4 factors, although further investigation is necessary.

5

## 6 **Conclusion**

7 In summary, many studies have drawn attention to neurocognitive dysfunction after surgery by  
8 using neuropsychological assessments prior to and after surgery. Results on the incidence and  
9 severity of postoperative cognitive decline is varying, mostly due to varying definitions for  
10 diagnosing postoperative cognitive dysfunction. The incidence of POCD in older patients at 3  
11 months ranges from 20 to 50% after cardiac surgery and 5 to 55% major noncardiac surgeries  
12 [12,19–23].

13 Although the etiology of postoperative cognitive dysfunction is still not fully understood,  
14 inflammatory-processes are currently considered to be central to its genesis. At the present time, no  
15 clear anesthetic and surgical components have been found to influence POCD. Nevertheless,  
16 several patient-related factors, such as advanced age, have been associated with an increased risk  
17 for cognitive decline. As the age of the general population undergoing surgery is growing older,  
18 investigations on preventive measures and interventions are warranted and they should be aptly  
19 applied.

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**Table 1.** A Summary of the Recommendations for the New Nomenclature of Perioperative Disorders, from The International Perioperative Cognition Nomenclature Working Group [16].

Terms	Time period
Neurocognitive disorder [mild or major [e.g. dementia]]	Pre-existing/preoperative cognitive impairment <i>or</i> cognitive impairment developing after 12 months of surgery.
Emergence delirium	Delirium diagnosed within minutes or hours after surgery.
Postoperative delirium	Delirium diagnosed within days after surgery, up to 1 week or until discharge.
Delayed neurocognitive recovery	Cognitive decline up to 30 days after surgery.
Postoperative [neuro]cognitive dysfunction	Cognitive impairment detected between 30 days up to 12 months after surgery.

**Table 2.** Neuropsychological Tests Used in the in the International Study of Post-Operative Cognitive Dysfunction 1 (ISPOCD 1) Study

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Tests	
Mini-mental state examination [MMSE] [68]	A commonly used assessment, initially developed to evaluate dementia. It assesses multiple cognitive domains including attention, memory and orientation.
Visual verbal learning test [69]	Based on Rey's auditive recall test. It assesses verbal memory, by asking patients to recall a list of words that they were presented with earlier.
Concept Shifting test [trail-making test] [70]	Also known as the trail-making tests A and B. It is used to assess executive function and attention, by asking subjects to connect a series of consecutive numbers, letters or both as quickly as possible.
Stroop color word interference test [71]	This test evaluates the ability to inhibit cognitive interreference from multiple congruent and incongruent stimuli.
Letter-digit coding test [symbol-digit substitution task] [72]	Used to assess executive function. Patients are presented with a series of digits and letters that are paired and another list of only digits. They are then asked to write the corresponding letter as fast as possible.
Four boxes test [73]	This test is computer-based. It is used to measure reaction time, by asking patients to select a black circle in one of four boxes on a screen as quickly as possible.

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