Gamma Knife Radiosurgery

This information will help you prepare for your Gamma Knife surgery.

What is the Gamma Knife?

The Gamma Knife is not actually a knife at all. Rather, it is an instrument that uses targeted radiation to perform brain surgery. The Gamma Knife allows the doctor to focus 192 beams of radiation just on the area being treated. Alone, each beam is too weak to cause any damage to the normal brain tissue. The Gamma Knife is extremely precise. It uses 3-D planning to shape the radiation dose to the size and shape of the affected area. The Gamma Knife is used only on the brain. It is used to treat:

**Brain Tumors**
- Acoustic neuroma/schwanoma.
- Glial tumors/primary brain tumors.
- Meningioma.
- Metastatic brain tumors.
- Pituitary tumors.
- Skull based tumors.

**Functional Disorders**
- Trigeminal neuralgia.
- Parkinson’s disease.
- Epilepsy.

**Vascular Disorders**
- Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM).
Most often, only one Gamma Knife treatment session is needed. The treatment begins early in the morning and lasts most of the day. It involves 4 phases.

- Head frame placement.
- Imaging (MRI or CT scan).
- Planning.
- Treatment.

In some cases, an overnight hospital stay may be needed.

**The Gamma Knife Team**

The Gamma Knife team consists of a neurosurgeon, radiation oncologist, radiation physicist and registered nurse. Together, the team provides care tailored to your specific needs.

**Before Surgery**

The Gamma Knife nurse will meet with you or call you at home. The nurse reviews what to expect on the day of treatment, including:

- Head frame placement.
- Imaging studies.
- Treatment planning.
- Gamma Knife treatment.
- Head frame removal.
- Follow-up care.

The nurse also:

- Answers any questions that you may have.
- Collects your medical insurance information (Pre-certification of insurance coverage is needed.).

**Day of Surgery**

Plan to arrive at _____________ on ___________________.

You may eat a light breakfast and take your routine morning medicines. Wear comfortable clothing. You may wear your own slacks during this treatment if they do not have metal in them. (Do not wear anything with metal, including undergarments.)

- Do not wear any makeup.
- Leave all valuables at home, including jewelry.
- Bring a list of all your current medicines.
You may want to bring:

- A CD (compact disc) to listen to while waiting or during treatment.
- A small bag of personal items (toiletries, a change of clothes) should an overnight stay be needed.

Parking is available for patients and visitors in the garage at 222 E. Huron, across from the Feinberg and Galter pavilions. For discounted rates, please bring your parking ticket with you. Tickets can be validated at the Customer Services Desks on the 1st and 2nd floor of the Feinberg and Galter pavilions; 1st floor of Prentice (including the Prentice 24-hour desk near the Superior entrance).

- Check in at the reception desk on the 4th floor.
- Tell the receptionist that you are having Gamma Knife surgery.

The nurse from the Gamma Knife team will meet you to escort you to the Radiology area. Only 2 family members may accompany you because of limited space.

**Head Frame Placement and Imaging**

When you arrive in the Radiology waiting area, you will be asked to change into a hospital gown.

The nurse will review the procedure with you, answer any questions and show you the Gamma Knife head frame in detail. You will be asked to sign consent forms. An IV (into the vein) line will be inserted. The IV is used to give contrast (dye) and fluids during the surgery. The doctor reviews your medical history and does a short physical exam. The nurse checks your blood pressure and pulse.

The neurosurgeon then places the Gamma Knife frame on your head. The frame has special markers on its surface. These markers are used to map the exact location of your Gamma Knife treatment.

The frame is held firmly in place by 4 pins: 2 on the forehead and 2 on the back of the head. No hair is shaved from your head and no incisions are made. Your pin sites are cleaned with alcohol and numbing medicine is injected into the area. This assures comfort during the frame placement. You will feel pressure as the pins are put in place. This is normal, and the pressure does subside. The frame remains on your head until after your surgery.

When the head frame is in place, a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan is done. A computed tomography (CT) scan may be done instead if you have metal in your body, such as a pacemaker or ear implants.
**Planning Phase**

After the imaging phase, the nurse takes you and your family to the Gamma Knife Center in the Radiation Oncology department. This is when the planning phase begins. The Gamma Knife team uses a computer to plan your specific radiation treatment. The planning phase may take an hour or more, depending on the size and shape of the area being treated. During this time, you will be made comfortable in the Gamma Knife area and your family is welcome to wait with you.

**Surgery**

After the planning phase, the treatment or surgery phase starts. The nurse helps you lie on a special bed. The team positions your head to direct the radiation to the targeted area of your brain. When your head is in the correct position, the team makes you as comfortable as possible. Then, because of the radiation, the team must leave the room. During the Gamma Knife treatment:

- You are viewed on camera by the doctor and nurse the entire time.
- You are able to talk to the doctor or nurse through a 2-way intercom.
- Your blood pressure and heart rate are checked.
- You are able to listen to music.

Surgery time varies based on your specific treatment plan.

**After Surgery**

When your treatment is over, your doctor removes the head frame. Antibiotic gauze and Band-Aids® are applied to each pin site. Some patients may have slight bleeding at the pin sites. Applying pressure almost always stops the bleeding.

If an overnight hospital stay is needed, you will go directly to the Neurosurgery Unit. If you are going home on the day of your surgery, you will recover in the Gamma Knife area for about 1 hour. You may have a mild headache from the frame removal. Your nurse can give you medicine for the pain. You also may have swelling above your eyes. This is caused by the numbing medicine used during the frame placement. The swelling lasts only a short time. Your nurse will apply ice packs to your forehead to help prevent the swelling. It is important to continue to use the ice packs after you go home.

If you do have a hospital stay:

- You may resume your normal diet.
- You may use the bathroom.
- Your family may visit.
Follow-Up Care

Before you leave the hospital, specific discharge guidelines are given based on your diagnosis. The full effects of Gamma Knife surgery do not happen right away, which makes follow-up care very important. This care includes doctor visits and imaging studies, such as MRI or CT scans. Please call your Gamma Knife neurosurgeon’s office at 312-695-8143 to make your follow-up appointments as instructed.

When to Call the Doctor

A small number of people have side effects from Gamma Knife surgery.

Call your doctor if you have:

- New onset of severe headaches.
- Weakness in your arms or legs.
- Numbness.
- New seizures.
- Vision changes.

There is some risk with every surgery. The risk varies with each person and the problem being treated. The risks of Gamma Knife surgery are low compared with traditional brain surgery. Most side-effects are temporary. Your surgeon will discuss the benefits and risks involved in your surgery. Please ask your doctor if you have any questions or concerns.

We Welcome Your Questions

We are happy to talk with you and answer your questions about Gamma Knife surgery. The Gamma Knife nurses are on hand to talk with you on weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Please call us at 312-926-5070.

Health Information Resources

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women’s Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to hlc@nmh.org.

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at www.nmh.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar a el departamento de representantes para pacientes al 312-926-3112.