

## How do different payers define observation time?

Different insurance payers have different amounts of time that are covered in observation.

For example:

- **Traditional Medicare:** Observation services can last up to two nights in a hospital. A stay of two or more nights in the hospital is required to be an inpatient stay.
- **Medicare Advantage Plans:** Rules can vary, but most permit only 23 hours in observation status.
- **Medicaid/ Medicaid Managed Care Plans - Healthy Options:** Allow up to 48 hours in observation status.
- **Private/Commercial Insurance:** Rules can vary, but most permit only 23 hours in observation status.

At the end of your observation stay, your physician will decide whether to discharge you from the hospital or to admit you as an inpatient.

## What if my physician decides my condition requires acute inpatient care?

Your physician must then write an order to convert your outpatient observation stay to a full inpatient admission.



## What if my physician decides that I do not require inpatient care?

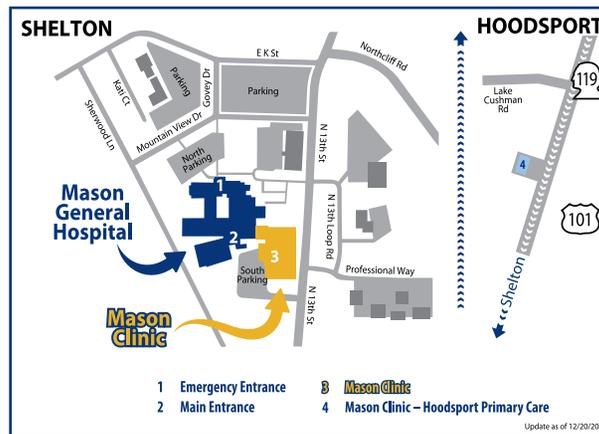
You will be discharged from the hospital.

## Can I be placed into outpatient observation after undergoing an outpatient surgical procedure?

It is possible. For example, Medicare allows for a 4-6 hour recovery period. The intent of outpatient surgery is to have your surgery and be discharged the same day. However, if you experience a **post-operative complication**, then your physician may place you into observation to monitor you further.

## If I want to spend the night after my outpatient surgery, will Medicare cover this?

No, Medicare will only pay if there is a medical condition that warrants postoperative monitoring. If you desire to stay over for patient/family convenience, you will be fully responsible for payment.



# A Patient's Guide to Observation Care



901 Mountain View Drive • PO Box 1668  
Shelton, WA 98584  
360.426.1611  
[www.masongeneral.com](http://www.masongeneral.com)

# Frequently Asked Questions

*Although outpatient observation stays are now commonplace in hospitals, you may be unfamiliar with what it actually means to you, the patient. Following are some frequently asked questions and answers that will help you better understand outpatient observation status and billing.*

## **What is outpatient observation?**

Observation services are hospital outpatient services where an overnight stay may be required. A physician's order is necessary for testing and medical evaluation of your condition.

Within the first 48 hours of your stay, the physician will decide whether you require an inpatient stay, or may be discharged home for care in another setting.

## **What kinds of conditions usually require observation care?**

Observation services are typically ordered for conditions that can be treated in 48 hours or less, or when the cause for your symptoms has not yet been determined.

Some examples are nausea, vomiting, weakness, stomach pain, headache, kidney stones, fever, some breathing problems, some types of chest pain and neurological symptoms.

## **Does observation care count toward my three-midnight hospital stay for skilled care?**

No. Any of your time spent during an observation stay **does not** count toward Medicare's three midnight (consecutive) hospital stay rule to qualify for skilled nursing home placement. If your status changes from observation to inpatient, your three-midnight hospital stay begins only from the time when you become an inpatient.

## **How is an observation stay billed?**

An observation stay is billed under outpatient services (under Medicare this would be under Part B) while an inpatient admission is billed under inpatient services (under Medicare this would be billed under Part A).

## **What am I expected to pay for as an observation patient?**

Since observation stays are billed as an outpatient service, your insurance co-pays and deductibles, along with any additional costs, will probably be based on the outpatient terms of your policies. Your out-of-pocket costs may change depending on whether your stay is designated as observation or full inpatient admission.

\*Note: Medicare may not cover some "self-administered" medications in the

Hospital Outpatient/Emergency Room /Observation setting. See Alert for Medicare Patients handout for details.

Therefore, any costs from a nursing home following an observation stay **or** any inpatient hospital stay **less** than three midnights are the responsibility of the patient and will not be covered by Medicare as a Part B service.



## *Mission*

United Community, Empowered  
People, Exceptional Health

## *Vision*

Provide the best patient-centered  
care in the Pacific Northwest

## *Values*

Service & Relationships