

# Retained sponges: Are you at risk?

*Thousands of people in the United States are victims of retained surgical sponges but technology could fix the problem.*

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality states that during a 20-year period from 1992 to 2012, 26.8 million surgeries were performed in the United States. Statistics also show a steady increase in the number of surgical procedures each year, which is not surprising, given the advancements that have been made in medicine.

People in Phoenix often understand that every surgery is not without risk but there are some mistakes that occur which shouldn't. It is estimated by The New York Times that one problem which happens again and again is retained sponges. These make up the majority of the 4,000 [retained surgical items](#) cases that are reported each year in the United States.

## How are sponges left behind?

When a surgeon opens the body, there is a great deal of blood and other bodily fluids. Sponges are used to soak up these fluids in order to give the surgeon better visibility of the operation site. The sponges are white and rather small - only 4x4 inch squares. During a typical surgery, dozens can be inserted into the surgical site and by the end of the surgery, the sponges no longer resemble sponges, but body tissue, making it hard to identify them.

Hospitals rely on manual counting to make sure that all of the sponges are located and removed before the operation site is closed. However, this method is less than effective, as the majority of cases involving retained sponges show that the surgical team's count failed to reveal that one or more were missing.

## What happens after retainment?

When a surgical sponge is retained, or left behind, it often becomes attached to tissue within the body and eventually [causes an infection](#). USA Today states that for some victims, the problem surfaces a few weeks later, while for others, it may not appear till a year or more after the surgery was performed. By this time, the victim is left struggling with many symptoms that may include the following:

- Abdominal pain

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Digestive dysfunction

In addition to the physical symptoms, victims must undergo surgery to remove the sponge and often suffer permanent scarring, loss of a portion of their intestines, or permanent pain and suffering. One woman, who was the victim of a retained sponge after having a cesarean section, was told that she should not try to have another child because she could experience complications from the retained sponge damage.

### **Hospitals putting patients unnecessarily at risk?**

In recent years, technology has surfaced that could protect patients from becoming the victim of a retained sponge but few hospitals have implemented it. The argument is that the technology is expensive, but research shows that hospitals pay an average of \$100,000 to \$200,000 every time someone is the victim of this mistake. In relation, the added cost per surgery with the new technology is under \$15.

Patients in Phoenix and elsewhere have the right to be treated in a safe manner while they are under a hospital's care. When a hospital or surgical team acts negligently, patients should explore their rights with an injury attorney.