

Let's Talk About...

Children of all ages have questions and fears when they come to the hospital, especially before surgery. They may feel confused, overwhelmed, and frightened. Some children have fantasies and worries about what will happen at the hospital. These fears are often more frightening than what will really happen.

Parents and other caregivers often don't know how to prepare their children for surgery. This is because they may not know what to expect. Sometimes, they feel it's best not to tell their child too much about the surgery. However, usually, the more both you and your child learn about the surgery and what to expect, the easier it will be to cope.

What are common fears and worries that my child may have?

Common fears and worries include:

- **“What if I wake up in the middle of the operation?”** This will not happen. The doctor knows just the right amount of sleeping medicine to keep your child asleep so he will not feel the operation. The doctor stops giving the sleeping medicine at the end of the operation so your child will wake up. It is helpful to tell your child that you will be with him very soon after he wakes up.
- **“What if the doctors make a mistake? What if they do the wrong operation?”** Your child may worry the doctor will make a mistake that will leave his body altered forever. To reduce these fears, tell your child the hospital staff will put a “bracelet” on his wrist so everyone knows his name. They also carefully follow special procedures to mark the correct place for surgery on your child's body. This makes it easy for the doctors and

Preparing for surgery

nurses to give the right medicine and do the right tests and operations. Making a simple statement to your child such as “The doctors make only the smallest opening necessary to take out your appendix” can also be helpful.

Other common worries are:

- Being away from school and friends
- Having a part of his body destroyed or disfigured
- Needles
- Dying after surgery
- Thinking that going to the hospital is punishment for being bad

In addition, some special worries for teens may be:

- Body image, and anything that might affect his appearance
- Being thought of as different from his friends
- Having caregivers of the opposite gender
- Being physically exposed in any way

Even if your child or teen's worries seem silly to you, try to be sensitive about these issues and allow your child to discuss them with you if he chooses.

What can you do?

- 1 Learn as much as you can about your child's surgery.
- 2 Consider when and how to start preparing your child for surgery.
- 3 Talk with your child and answer his questions.
- 4 Make arrangements for your family before the day of surgery.
- 5 Come prepared the day of surgery.
- 6 Know what to expect of your child's behavior.

1 Learn as much as you can about your child's surgery—and help your child learn as much as he can too.

Your child can tell if you are upset or anxious about his surgery. Learn as much as you can so you are ready to answer his questions simply and honestly. You will be prepared to help your child learn.

Studies have shown that patients who are well prepared and have a realistic understanding of what to expect from their surgical experience:

- Are able to cope more effectively and express less distress
- Have less nausea and vomiting
- Are able to walk and eat sooner after surgery, and are often able to go home sooner
- Are calmer, have less pain, and need less pain medication
- Have fewer behavior disturbances following surgery

Parents who are well prepared are also able to cope more effectively and are better able to support their child.

Primary Children's Medical Center offers preoperative preparation classes for children of all ages (2-17) to help prepare them, and you, for surgery. Classes are normally held four times a week (Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays) for one hour (4:30-5:30 p.m.). Classes include video, age-appropriate activities, discussion and a tour. Ask your nurse or doctor for more information about these classes or call 801.662.2824 to register.

2 Consider when and how to start preparing your child for surgery

Parents often wonder how far in advance to prepare their child for surgery. This depends not only on your child's age, but when he starts asking questions.

- For infants (10 months or younger), you can begin preparing them at any time. Play peek-a-boo with surgery masks or let them wear surgery hats on their heads. They can also see and play with other medical items, as

appropriate, such as pretend stethoscopes and blood-pressure cuffs.

- For very young children, 10 months to three years old, you can begin preparing them two to three days ahead of time. You may need to review the same information with them over and over again. Children of this age can play with pretend doctor kits and real medical supplies such as surgical masks, tape, and medicine cups. This allows you to correct any misconceptions your child may have and gives him a way to play out his fears.
- For children four years old and older, you can begin preparing them four to seven days before going to the hospital. This will give your child enough time to think about his surgery and ask questions.
- For children older than seven and teens, an open discussion about the hospital should begin a few weeks ahead of time. You should actively involve children of this age when planning their surgery.

3 Talk with your child and answer his questions.

One of the best ways to prepare your child for surgery, especially after you have learned as much as possible, is to talk about it. Begin by asking your child or teen what he knows and understands about the hospital or the surgery. For example, "What sorts of people work there?" and "What will happen there?"

Children and teens may ask the same questions again and again. This means they are working hard to make sense of their surgery. It is helpful if you respond each time with simple, honest answers.

Here are some tips to help you talk with your child or teen about surgery:

- Use simple, understandable language.
- Help your child understand the reason for the hospitalization or surgery.
- Help your child understand that tests and operations are part of getting well.
- Reassure your child that going to the hospital is not a punishment for bad behavior. Tell

him that children never go to the hospital for being bad; they only go to the hospital to heal or get better.

- Tell your child that he will not be alone. You or a staff member will always be close to keep him safe. Tell your child you can be with him while waiting for surgery and when he is awake after the surgery.
- Explain what happens on the day of surgery. Give your child information about what will happen and in what order. Also give your child sensory information; that is, what he will see, hear, smell, taste and feel before and after the surgery.
- Unless your child specifically asks, you don't need to tell him about details that he will not directly experience, such as things that will happen when he is asleep in the operating room. If your child does ask, provide him with honest, simple answers. For example, "After you are asleep, the doctor will take out your tonsils." If you use the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel), you will give the most helpful answers and avoid giving your child details that may make him more distressed.
- Read children's books about operations and hospitals. You can find appropriate books at the public library.

Special tips for teens:

- Help your teen feel more grown up. Even though you need time together, teens also need time alone. Let your child know when you can be at the hospital. If you can't return when he expects you, call and tell him why.
- Support your teen in deciding about the surgery. For example, ask your teen who should know about the surgery (e.g., friends, family).
- Be honest with your teen about what will happen at the hospital. You want your child to trust you. Remember to keep it simple and talk about what your teen wants to discuss.
- Give your teenager time alone to talk to doctors, before the surgery and at the hospital. Your child may want to ask the

doctors or nurses some questions by himself.

- Try not to talk to others about your teen's illness without including him. You may need to talk with the doctors alone, but remember that teenagers may become angry if they think there are secrets about them. They need to know what is happening with their bodies. This helps them feel in control.
- Let your teenager know that it is okay to be afraid and to cry.
- Learn as much as you can about your child's surgery. When you are worried, your teenager can tell. The more you know, the better you and your teen will feel.
- Whether your teenager is staying at the hospital overnight or returning home the same day, encourage friends to send cards or call. Let your child decide who he wants to have visit and when.

If you need help in talking with your child and responding to his question's with simple, honest answers, you can call the Child Life Department at 801.662.3740.

4 Make arrangements for your family before the day of surgery.

If you have other children in your family, find someone to care for them on surgery day. This will allow you to focus on your child in the hospital rather than worry about what is happening at home.

5 Come prepared the day of surgery.

- Be very careful to have your child follow the instructions about not eating or drinking before surgery. This is an important part of presurgery preparation. If your child eats or drinks too close to his surgery time, the surgery may have to be canceled.
 - The night before surgery, after midnight, don't let your child eat or drink anything except clear liquids. Do not give your child broth or anything to drink that has pulp such as orange, grape, or tomato juice. Clear liquids include Jell-O®, Jell-O water, sugar water, apple juice,

7-Up®, Sprite®, Pedialyte®, KOOL-AID®, or water. Do not limit amounts unless your doctor or anesthesiologist tells you differently.

- Three hours before the scheduled surgery, don't let your child eat or drink anything by mouth.
- If you are breastfeeding, you can breast-feed your child until six hours before surgery. The nurse who calls the day before surgery will give you further instructions.
- You should eat before coming to the hospital. Even though your child may not be allowed to eat or drink before coming to the hospital, it is important that you do. Eating before arriving at the hospital helps keep up your energy level and lowers your stress. If possible, try not to eat or drink in front of your child since this can be frustrating for children who can't eat or drink before surgery.
- Bring one of your child's favorite toys or other familiar items with you. This will give your child a sense of security. It is most helpful if children bring something to which they have a strong attachment.
- Bring comfortable clothes for your child to wear home after surgery. For safety, your child must wear hospital pajamas to surgery and during the recovery period in the hospital. However, bring some comfortable, favorite clothes for your child to wear home. Also be sure to label everything and leave all valuables, such as jewelry, at home.

6 Know what to expect with your child's behavior.

It is common for children's behavior to change before, during, and after surgery. This is true even if the child spends only one day in the

hospital. Some children or teens may seem angry with parents and hospital staff. They may refuse to talk or play with you or the staff. This is normal behavior. Please understand that our staff is used to working with children and teenagers who are fearful and nervous.

One common behavior change is for children or teens to act younger than their age. For example, children who have recently been toilet trained may wet the bed for a few days or weeks after surgery. Some may start sucking their thumb or having temper tantrums, even if it has been some time since you have seen them do this. Older children and teenagers may be much more quiet and shy in the hospital and their attention spans may be short.

Remember that these are all healthy, normal responses to being in the hospital. Although it may require a lot of patience, it is important to support your child as much as possible. Try to not be angry with your child, withdraw from him, or threaten him. These only upset your child further and leave him feeling very alone.

Once your child or teen is home, you may continue to notice changes in behavior. Nightmares are a common response after surgery. Your child may also be more dependent on you and express more fears about leaving you. Teens may be moody or withdrawn. Some may get angry more easily. The most helpful thing is to support your child through this behavior and avoid punishing him for these responses.

Most behavior changes disappear within two to four weeks after coming home.

If you have questions about your child's surgery or hospital stay:

Call the Same Day Surgery Clinical Educator at 801.662.2882 or the Child Life Department at 801.662.3740.



Pediatric Education Services
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