Anesthesia for Children

What is anesthesia?

Anesthesia is the use of medicine to block feeling and pain during a medical procedure. The medicine can block feeling in just one area of your child’s body or in the whole body.

A doctor who specializes in anesthesia (an anesthesiologist) will discuss the best anesthesia type for your child based on the surgery your child is having and their overall health.

Is anesthesia safe?

Overall, anesthesia is very safe. But, with any type of anesthesia, there may be some side effects or problems (although rare). The way that anesthesia is given can also cause rare problems. The most common problems can include damage to teeth or vocal cords or bad reactions to the anesthesia.

Very rare problems—like infections, bleeding, blood clots, paralysis, stroke, brain damage, heart attack, or death—are also possible.

Types of anesthesia

Check the type of anesthesia your child will receive.

☐ General anesthesia

This is the most common type of anesthesia used for children during surgery. It will put your child into a deep sleep and block most feeling throughout your child’s body.

How it’s given: medicine is given either through a small plastic tube (an IV) which is inserted into a vein, or as a gas to breathe—or both. After your child is asleep, the doctor will place a breathing tube down the throat to help your child breathe.

☐ Epidural or spinal anesthesia

These types of anesthesia are typically used in combination with general anesthesia to help control pain after surgery. They block pain in the lower half of the body.

How these are given:

- An epidural involves inserting a needle near the spinal cord. A thin tube is then put through the needle. The needle is removed, and the tube stays in place. This way, more or less medicine can be given through the tube as needed.
- A spinal block is when medicine is injected directly through a needle into the lower back near the spine.

☐ Local anesthesia or nerve block

This type of anesthesia blocks pain in a specific area of the body like an arm or a leg. If used, it is usually combined with general anesthesia in children while they are asleep to help with pain afterwards.

How it’s given: medicine is injected into the skin or muscle near an incision, a joint, or a specific nerve. A small tube may be placed in the area so that more medicine can be given as needed.
What are the benefits and possible risks of anesthesia?

General anesthesia

Benefits: This can be started quickly and make your child go to sleep fast. It blocks most feeling including pain.

Possible risks:
- Throat pain, temporary voice changes, or injury to the mouth or teeth from the breathing tube
- Drowsiness, confusion, or restlessness when waking up
- Breathing problems or fluid in the lungs
- Teeth clenching when waking up, which may cause injury to the teeth, mouth, or dental work
- Nausea or vomiting
- Very rarely, heart problems, stroke, or other life-threatening problems

Epidural or spinal anesthesia

Benefits: These block most feeling from the waist or chest down, and they work quickly.

Possible risks:
- Headache or backache
- Buzzing in the ears
- Convulsions
- Low blood pressure
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain or itching
- Numbness spreading too high in the body, resulting in the need for a breathing tube
- Blood-vessel injury or infection
- Very rarely, injury to the spinal cord

Local anesthesia or nerve block

Benefits: This has few side effects.

Possible risks:
- Infection
- Convulsions
- Pain
- Ongoing numbness or weakness
- Blood-vessel injury

What happens when my child receives anesthesia?

- Your child may have an IV inserted in a vein. This allows your child to receive fluids and medicines.
- The anesthesiologist will use special equipment to check your child’s breathing, heartbeat, blood pressure, and temperature.
- Your child may have a tube inserted through the mouth and down the throat to help with breathing during surgery. This will happen after your child is asleep so your child won’t feel it.

How will my child feel when the anesthesia wears off?

The way your child feels after the medical procedure depends on the type of anesthesia used. Your child may feel tingling, burning, or aching.

Healthcare providers will continue to treat your child’s pain after surgery. Your child may take pain medicine by mouth or get the medicine through an IV. Your child may also have a device that controls how often and how much medicine is given.

Anesthesia safety checklist

Here are important things you can do before your child receives anesthesia to keep them safe:

- Find out when your child can last eat and drink before surgery. Your healthcare provider will give you this very important information. Anesthesia can relax your child’s stomach muscles. If there’s anything in the stomach when your child gets anesthesia, it could cause your child to vomit or choke. Your child could then breathe vomit into the lungs, which could cause serious problems. Tell the doctor the last time your child ate or drank anything.

- Give your child’s healthcare provider a detailed medical history.
  - Tell about any of your child’s medical problems, recent illnesses, and allergies.
  - List all of your child’s current medicines and supplements like vitamins and herbs.
  - Describe any bad reactions that your child or other family members have had to anesthesia.

- Get any lab tests, x-rays, or other tests done that your healthcare provider recommends.