

Preparing your child for surgery (preschool, 4 - 5 years)



Patient and Family Education

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

You can help prepare your child for surgery. Preparing ahead of time can help:

- Calm your child's fears.
- Make recovery easier and faster.
- Calm you as you focus on him, on what to expect and on how to care for him afterwards.

What are some common fears of preschoolers?

Young children are often afraid of new or different things. Some common fears for preschoolers include:

- Being away from you and other caregivers
- Being left alone
- The unknown
- Needles and shots
- Waking up during surgery
- Thinking he is in the hospital as punishment
- Loss of control
- Being in a strange place
- Part of his body being damaged or injured
- Pain
- The dark
- Being away from home

How can I help prepare my child for surgery?

This list of tips can help you when you talk with your child about surgery.

Talking with your child

- Tell your child about the surgery 3 to 4 days before it happens. Avoid using too much detail.
- Read books about going to the hospital to your child. Young children may be scared when they see the doctor wearing a mask and cap.
 - *A Visit to Sesame Street Hospital* by Deborah Hautzig shows pictures of what people and things will look like.
 - You can also ask the doctor for a mask and cap that your child can see or play with.
- Allow your child to “play out” the surgery on a doll or stuffed animal. Playing with a doctor or nurse kit is a fun way for your child to act out his fears.
- Make sure your child understands that his surgery is not a punishment. Help your child understand why he needs surgery.
- Preschoolers have very active imaginations. Make sure your child does not have any wrong ideas about what will happen.
- Offer praise, positive reinforcement and support.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Preparing for surgery - preschool, continued

Choosing your words

- Speak in a way that your child can understand.
- Speak simply with your child, and be careful what words you use. For example:
 - Instead of saying, “The doctor will put you to sleep with some gas,” you could say, “The doctor will help you fall asleep. You will breathe some sleepy air through a mask. The sleepy air helps you take a special nap, so you do not feel anything while you are sleeping.”
 - Remind your child that this special nap is different than when he falls asleep at night.
- Instead of using the words “hurt” or “pain”, use words like “sore” or “achy”.
 - If a medicine will burn, tell your child that it will feel “warm” or “different” instead.
 - If your child may be sore, tell him that he will be able to have medicine to help him feel better.
- Explain how the surgery can help in a way that your child can understand.
 - For example, you could say, “After the doctor fixes your leg, you can play outside again.”
- Be honest. Avoid making promises you cannot keep, such as, “I promise it will not hurt.” Also, avoid giving false reasons for the hospital visit. Being truthful helps to build trust.

Visit the hospital

If possible, visit the hospital before the surgery.

- The Child Life department offers tours. A tour can help your child learn about the hospital.
- This can also help your child see the sights, sounds and events he will have the day of surgery.
- You and your child will have a chance to ask questions.

The surgery

- To help your child feel like he has some control, allow your child to choose a favorite stuffed animal, toy or blanket to bring to the hospital.
- Let your child know that you will wait close by during his surgery and will see him as soon as he gets to his room.
- Be patient with your child. It is normal for preschoolers to need more attention during this time.
- These behaviors can also be normal during this time:
 - Your child may become uncooperative or throw temper tantrums.
 - Your child may act younger than his age and revert to such things as bedwetting or thumb-sucking.
 - These behaviors usually improve after the stress of surgery has passed.

Take care of yourself

- Make sure that you know about your child’s surgery and know what to expect. This can help reduce your fears about it.
- Make sure that you, your child and your family are well-rested.
- Take care of yourself. Your child can sense and react to your stress level.

The Child Life department provides hospital tours for all children above the age of 3 years.

- To arrange a tour at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston, please call 404-785-6325.
- To arrange a tour at Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta at Scottish Rite, please call 404-785-4286.

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