

Preparing your child for surgery (toddlers 1 - 3 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 toddler'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 for toddlers?

Toddlers are often afraid of new or different things. Some common fears for toddlers include:

- Being away from you and other caregivers
- The dark
- The unknown
- Medical equipment (looks and sounds scary)
- Loss of control
- Being left alone
- Pain
- Monsters and ghosts
- Strangers
- Feeling helpless

How can I help prepare my toddler for surgery?

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

Talking with your child

- Tell your toddler about the surgery 1 to 2 days before it happens. Your child will not have as much time to worry or dream about the surgery this way.
- Read books to your toddler about going to the hospital. 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 the doctors 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 toddler 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.
- Offer praise, positive reinforcement and support.

Choosing your words

- Speak in a way that your toddler can understand.
- Speak simply with your child, and be careful of the words you use. For example:
 - Instead of saying “The doctor will put you to sleep with some gas.”
 - 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.

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

Preparing for surgery - toddlers, continued

- 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.
- Be honest. Avoid making promises you cannot keep, such as, “I promise it will not hurt.” Being truthful helps to build trust.

The hospital visit

- To help your toddler feel like he has some control, allow him to choose a favorite stuffed animal, toy or blanket to bring with him.
- 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.
- It is normal for toddlers to become fussy and have behavior changes during this time. Be patient, and try to remain calm so you can help your child.

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 toddler 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 old.

- To arrange a tour at Egleston, please call 404-785-6325.
- To arrange a tour at Scottish Rite, please call 404-785-4286.

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