

Preparing Your 3- to 5-Year-Old for Surgery



Your child is having surgery. You may have concerns about how your child will cope with this experience. Knowing what to expect can help you and your child feel better about surgery. Read this sheet to find out how you can help prepare your child for surgery.



How will your preschooler react?

Preschoolers may worry about new experiences. For instance, they may worry that surgery will hurt. The hospital may seem like a large and frightening place to them. They may be overwhelmed from meeting so many new people at once. Also, the unfamiliar equipment may seem scary.

How can you help prepare your preschooler for surgery?

Preschoolers can understand simple details about surgery. Talk with your preschooler about surgery a few days in advance. But be aware that preschoolers tend to have active imaginations and short attention spans. They may not be able to remember everything you tell them. Give them information slowly so there is less chance of overwhelming them. Don't be surprised if they ask you the same questions more than once. Do the following to help prepare your preschooler for surgery:

- Keep your emotions under control. Your child can sense how you're feeling. If you're upset, your child may respond in a similar way. Try to stay calm and relaxed.
- Choose your words carefully when explaining surgery to your child. As a general guide, explain only what your child will directly experience. Be honest but gentle with your child.
- Help your child understand the reason for surgery. For instance, if your child is having their tonsils removed, you might say that surgery will help your child have fewer sore throats.
- Take a tour of the surgery department with your child if the hospital has this choice. This can help both of you be more familiar with the hospital setting. Encourage your child to speak with hospital staff.
- Use play items to teach your child about surgery. Children's books about the hospital and surgery can help. Toy medical kits can help your child become comfortable with medical equipment. Also, encourage your child to use stuffed animals or dolls as "patients."

- Ask at the hospital if you can have an anesthesia mask to show your child. Have your child hold an anesthesia mask and practice breathing through it.
- Let your child make choices. Giving your child choices helps them feel in control. Have your child pick toys and activities to play with at the hospital. Also, have your child help pack their own suitcase to bring to the hospital. At the hospital, your child may be able to make choices, such as which wrist to wear an identification bracelet on.
- Bring your child's favorite item, such as a stuffed animal or a security blanket, with you to the hospital. This familiar object can help your child feel safe.
- When your child needs soothing, do what normally works. This may include the following:
 - Hold or rock your child.
 - Touch or stroke your child's hair.
 - Read or sing to your child. Your familiar voice is comforting.
- Stay with your child as long as possible before surgery. Hospital staff will do all they can to reunite you with your child as soon as possible after surgery.
- Ask hospital staff if your child's siblings or friends can visit.

Child life specialist

Many hospitals have a child life specialist. This person is specially trained to help children understand and cope with their hospital experience. Families can arrange to see a child life specialist when their child is scheduled for surgery. The child life specialist uses age-appropriate items, such as books, dolls, and toy medical or hospital equipment to explain surgery. Parents and siblings are encouraged to attend and be part of these sessions.

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