

Preparing Your 1- to 2-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 toddler react?

- Toddlers may worry about new experiences. 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 people and equipment may seem scary.
- Toddlers may suddenly go back to younger behavior (regression). They may be more clingy, cry more often, or even forget their toilet training.

How can you help prepare your toddler for surgery?

Toddlers can understand simple details about surgery. Talk with your toddler about surgery 1 to 2 days in advance. Keep in mind that most toddlers have 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. Do the following to help your toddler get ready for surgery:

- Try to stay calm and relaxed. Your child can sense how you're feeling. If you're upset or fearful, your child may respond in a similar manner.
- 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.
- Take a tour of the surgery department with your child if the hospital has this option. This can help both of you become more comfortable with the hospital setting.

- Use play items to teach your child about surgery. Toddlers like to touch and explore things. Toy medical kits can help your child become familiar with medical equipment. Children's books about the hospital and surgery may also help.
- Ask at the hospital if you can have an anesthesia mask to show your child. Have your child hold and explore the anesthesia mask. Encourage your child to practice breathing through it.
- Bring your toddler's favorite item, such as a stuffed animal or security blanket, with you to the hospital. Keep this familiar object with your child at all times. It can help your child feel safe.
- Participate in the care of your child as much as possible when in the hospital. If your child needs soothing, do what normally works. This may include the following:
 - Holding or rocking your child
 - Touching or stroking your child's hair
 - Speaking or singing to your child—your familiar voice is comforting
- Have items ready to help your child relax. This can include toys such as stuffed animals or books.
- 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 whether your child's siblings 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 a part of these sessions.

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