

Preparing your preschooler for surgery (ages 4 to 5 years)



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

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

What are some common fears for 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 they are in the hospital as punishment
- Being in a strange place
- Part of their body being damaged or injured
- Pain
- The dark
- Being away from home
- Loss of control

How can I help prepare my preschooler for surgery?

Talk with them

- Tell your child about the surgery 3 to 4 days before it happens.
 - Be honest with them about what may hurt and what will not hurt.
 - Try to avoid creating extra concern.
- Read books like *A Visit to Sesame Street Hospital* by Deborah Hautzig. It shows pictures of what people and things will look like.
- Young children may be scared when they see the doctor wearing a mask and cap. Ask the doctor for a mask and cap that your child can see or play with.
- Let your child “play out” the surgery on a doll or stuffed animal using a pretend doctor kit.
 - Medical play gives preschoolers a chance for control and a way to work out and understand their feelings.
 - It also gives you a chance to watch your child's play, listen for any fears or concerns, and talk with them about anything that is unclear to them.
- Make sure your child understands their surgery is not a punishment.
 - Help them understand why they need surgery.
 - Use simple words, and explain things clearly.
- Preschoolers have very active imaginations. Help them know what will actually happen by telling them what they can expect to see, smell, feel, taste and hear.
- Offer praise, positive reinforcement and support. Encourage your child to share their feelings. Listen and empathize with them.

Choose your words

- 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.”
- Speak simply with your child, and be careful what words you use. For example:
 - Avoid saying, “The doctor will put you to sleep with some gas.”

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

Preparing your preschooler for surgery, continued

- Instead 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 they fall asleep at night.
- Tell the truth. Being truthful helps build trust.
 - Avoid making promises you cannot keep such as, “I promise it will not hurt.”
 - Also avoid giving untrue reasons for the hospital visit.
- If your child may be sore, tell them that they will be able to get medicine to help them feel better.

Visit the hospital

Visit the hospital before surgery if possible. The Child Life department offers tours for children older than 3 years of age.

- A tour can help your child learn about the hospital. It also gives them a chance to see the sights, sounds and events they will have the day of surgery.
- You and your child will have a chance to ask questions.
- Call 404-785-8648 to schedule a tour.

Prepare for surgery

- Let your child choose a favorite stuffed animal, toy or blanket to bring with them.
- Let your child know you will:
 - Wait close by during their surgery.
 - See them when they get to their room.
- It is normal for preschoolers to have some behavior changes during this time. Most often, they improve after the stress of surgery has passed. Your child may:
 - Need more attention. Be patient. Try to remain calm, so you can help your child.
 - Become uncooperative or throw temper tantrums.
 - Act younger than their age and go back to doing such things as bedwetting or thumb sucking.

Take care of yourself

- Make sure you know about your child’s surgery and what to expect. This can help decrease your fears.
- 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.

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.

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