

How to Prepare a Child for Surgery



As a caregiver, you play an important role in helping your child or teenager cope with having surgery and hospitalization.

It is important to provide age-appropriate information that includes reasons and explanations for their surgery. Familiarizing children with the process of surgery may help to clarify their misunderstandings and ease their fears. The more information you have about the tests, treatments, or procedures your child may need to have, the better prepared you will be to help support your child during his or her hospital stay. Children respond to new experiences in their own unique way, however below are some general age-based reactions.

Infants (ages 0-1)

- Infants may become stressed and upset when separating from caregivers. You can help your infant cope by touching or swaddling them, as well as bringing their favorite comfort item from home.
- Changes to your infant's typical routine may be hard for them. Rocking, swinging, or talking to them will help to provide comfort in the unfamiliar environment.

Toddler (ages 1-3)

- To your toddler, surgery may appear to be a punishment. You can help them to understand by being open and honest about what will be happening and by using concrete language, such as *"You are going to take a special nap and the doctor is going to fix your owie."*
- Medical equipment may look or sound scary to your toddler. Below is how you could explain this to your toddler:
 - Blood Pressure Cuff: a hug for your arm or leg
 - Pulse Oximeter: a little pillow for your finger or toe
 - Mask: this is placed on your nose and mouth and you breathe special air. It is very soft like a pillow.
- Toddlers may become upset when separating from caregivers. One way you can provide support to them is by providing them with another comfort, like their favorite blanket or stuffed animal.





Preschool (ages 4-5)

- Preschool-aged children have powerful imaginations, which can cause them to believe things could be worse than the actual circumstance. They may believe that they are being punished or fear changes to their body. You can relieve these fears by stating why and what will happen a few days before the surgery date by using concrete language, such as, "You are going to take a special nap and the doctor is going to make your nose or throat feel better."
- Medical equipment may look or sound scary to your preschooler. Below is how you could explain this to your preschooler:
 - Blood Pressure Cuff: a hug for your arm or leg
 - Pulse Oximeter: a little pillow for your finger or toe
 - Mask: this is placed on your nose and mouth and you breathe special air. It is very soft like a pillow.
- The new sensations may be a stressor to your child. You can provide support through bringing a comfort item from home, using concrete and simple language, as well as offering realistic choices.

School-age (ages 6-12)

- School-aged children could fear changes that surgery may bring such as "looking different", having an injury, or losing "normal" body functions. It may be helpful to prepare your child 1-2 weeks prior to allow them time to process the information.
- Use concrete language with them to explain the process of what will happen that day. Below are some examples of what you could say:
 - Blood Pressure Cuff: gives your arm a tight squeeze to check your blood pressure
 - Pulse Oximeter: it is a clip for your finger or toe that checks your oxygen level
 - EKG Stickers: these are stickers that go on your chest and stomach so the doctors can monitor your heart during surgery
- Your child may desire independence, but may also require care from caregivers. Your child may also fear loss of control of their body or may wonder what he/she will look or feel like after surgery. You can support your child by being open and honest, as well as encouraging them to ask any questions they may have.

Adolescent (ages 13 and up)

- Your adolescent may want to be prepared for the date of surgery and what to expect. Try to give as much detail as your adolescent would like.
- Your adolescent may fear changes to their "normal" life such as a loss of control or privacy, as well as being away from friends. You can support them by giving them privacy when appropriate, assuring them that being emotional is normal, and being patient with them.
- Waking up during surgery, experiencing pain, and questions about what they may look or feel like are common fears for teens. It may be beneficial for you to be open and honest with them, as well as encourage them to ask questions.

Child Life Can Help

If you are concerned about how to discuss this with your child, Child Life Specialists at HSHS St. Vincent Children's Hospital can help. They are trained to teach children and families the skills it takes to cope with a hospitalization. During surgery, Child Life Specialists can help children and families prepare for the experience by using medical play, age-appropriate explanations and comfort measures.

If you're interested in speaking or meeting with a Child Life Specialist, please call (920) 433-8641 or notify your doctor that you are interested in being seen by a Child Life Specialist.

