



Preparing Children and Teens for Surgery

Preparing your child for surgery

A child's surgery experience can be stressful for the whole family. This preparation guide is a tool to support you and your child before their upcoming surgery. We included preparation tips and information to consider for each developmental level. On the back of this guide, you'll find child friendly definitions for common surgery terms.

General

- **Preparation timeline.** It works well to prepare preschool and younger school-aged children 1-2 days before the surgery. Teens may benefit from preparation at least one week before so they have time to process and ask questions. Keep the conversation going.
- **Honest and simple.** When talking about the upcoming surgery, it's best to keep information honest and as clear as possible.
- **Sensory information.** You can share information with children related to their senses — what they will see, hear, and feel.
- **Questions and feelings.** Encourage your child to ask questions and share feelings about the surgery. Continue to promote expressive outlets, including play.
- **Familiar items.** Have your child pick a few of their favorite items to bring with them to the hospital.
- **Medical team.** Share how the medical team is there to help your child. This can build trust with the team.
- **Self-care.** Taking care of yourself will allow you to better support your child throughout the experience.



Infant (Birth-1 year)

Potential stressors:

- Loss of routine
- Separation from caregiver
- New sights, sounds, and smells
- Hunger

Preparation tips:

- Bring familiar comfort items from home like a blanket or sound machine.
- Use play items: rattles, crib mirrors or mobiles
- Hold, touch, talk, and sing to your baby.

Toddler (1-3 years)

Potential stressors:

- Loss of routine
- Separation from caregiver
- New place and faces
- Fear of medical tools and procedures
- Magical thinking (e.g., “Am I getting surgery because I was not being nice the other day?”)
- Hunger

Preparation tips:

- Describe the surgery plan in simple terms 1-2 days beforehand. Continue to talk about what to expect leading up to the day of surgery. Using books about going to the hospital can be helpful.
- Provide simple and realistic choices to increase your child’s sense of control (e.g., “What movie do you want to watch after surgery?”).

- Encourage self-expression and play. Providing a doctor's kit can help children play out questions and feelings they may have about the upcoming surgery.
- Bring familiar items like a favorite stuffed animal and play item.

School-age (6-12 years)

Potential stressors:

- Being away from school and friends
- Waking up during surgery or not waking up after surgery
- Fear of pain or death
- Loss of control/abilities
- How surgery may change their appearance

Preparation tips:

- Talk about the surgery in advance so they know what to expect. Reading books about the hospital or surgery can be helpful. Keep the conversation going and have your child explain back to you the surgery plan to check for understanding.
- Provide simple realistic choices to increase the child's sense of control (e.g., "What items do you want to bring to the hospital?").
- Your child may have strong feelings about the upcoming surgery – this is normal. Support their feelings and talk about how the surgery will help their body and/or situation.
- Encourage peer connection throughout the experience.





Teens (13-18 years)

Potential stressors:

- Being away from school and friends
- Fear of waking up during surgery or not waking up after surgery
- Fear of pain or death
- How surgery may change their appearance
- Loss of control/abilities
- Lack of privacy
- Fear of the unknown

Preparation tips:

- Talk about the surgery 1-2 weeks beforehand and include the teen in the planning process.
- Be honest about what to expect and keep your teen involved. Teens want to feel heard and understood.
- Encourage self-expression and questions leading up to surgery.
- Maintain your teen's privacy while in the hospital.
- Teens may have strong feelings about the upcoming surgery – this is normal. Support their feelings and continue to include them in the process.
- Encourage peer connection throughout the experience.

It's normal for children to need more attention before and after surgery. Children may have big feelings and be less cooperative. This can happen when a child is experiencing a change, big event, and/or is feeling a loss of control. With preparation, time for play and processing, children will usually come back to baseline after the stress of the surgery has passed.

Common Terms:

- **Surgery:** A procedure where the doctor will fix or check your _____ (name of body part).
- **Pre-Op:** This is where you will meet everyone on your care team and get ready for surgery.
- **Blood Pressure Cuff:** A soft band that wraps around your arm/leg that gives you a tight squeeze (and then lets go) to show how strong your heart is.
- **Pulse Oximeter:** A sticker or plastic clip that goes on your finger or toe with a red light that tells how much air your body is getting.
- **Leads:** Small wires connected to stickers that are placed on certain parts of your body (usually the chest area).





- **IV or Intravenous:** A small tube or straw that is usually placed in your hand or arm to give you medicine and water.
- **Anesthesia:** A medicine that makes you stay asleep during a procedure or surgery. While asleep with this medicine you will not feel, hear, or see anything.
- **Anesthesia Mask:** A plastic mask with a soft pillow that goes over your mouth and nose to give you medicine to breathe before a procedure or surgery.
- **Recovery area:** This is where you will wake up after surgery. Your family can be here with you.

For more child friendly medical terms, see app: Simply Sayin'.

Resources

Children's Surgery Center

[health.ucdavis.edu/children/
services/childrens-surgery-center/](https://health.ucdavis.edu/children/services/childrens-surgery-center/)



Preparation Video

<https://youtu.be/r6etZPPrsG0>



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