

# Let's Talk About...

## Surgery: Emotionally Preparing

Children of all ages have questions and fears when they come to the hospital, especially before surgery. They may feel confused, overwhelmed, and frightened. Helping your child know what to expect can help them:

- Cope more effectively and recover more quickly after surgery
- Have less nausea and vomiting
- Walk and eat sooner after surgery
- Go home sooner
- Be calmer, have less pain, and need less pain medicine
- Have fewer behavior changes after surgery

Read on for tips on helping your child prepare emotionally for surgery.

### How can I learn (and help my child learn) more about the surgery?

The best way to learn more about your child's upcoming surgery is to attend a pre-surgery class.

This class is held:

- **Mondays and Wednesdays** from 4:30 to 5:30 PM at Primary Children's Hospital
- **Thursdays** from 4 to 4:45 PM (2 to 10 years old) and 5 to 5:45 PM (11 years old and older) at Primary Children's Outpatient Services at Riverton (other classes by appointment)

The class—for parents, patients, and siblings to attend—includes:

- A tour of the surgery area
- A video about what to expect during surgery
- A medical play session with surgery equipment, smells, sights, and sounds

- Time for older children and teens to talk about their concerns
- Time for parents to ask staff questions

To register for the class, call 801-662-2824 (main hospital) or 801-285-1537 (Riverton).

### When and how do I prepare my child for surgery?

You may wonder how far in advance to prepare your child for surgery. This depends on your child's age and when they start asking questions.

- **Babies (1 year old or younger):** Prepare your baby at any time by playing peek-a-boo with surgery masks or letting them wear surgery hats on their head. Your baby can also see and play with other medical items, as appropriate, such as pretend stethoscopes and blood-pressure cuffs.
- **Toddlers (1 to 3 years old):** Prepare your child 2 to 3 days before surgery. They can play with pretend doctor kits and real medical supplies, like surgical masks, tape, and medicine cups. This allows you to help them talk about their fears and understand what will happen during surgery. You may need to talk about the same things over and over again.
- **Preschoolers and school-age children (4 to 7 years old):** Prepare your child 4 to 7 days before surgery. This gives them enough time to think about the surgery and ask questions.
- **Older children (7 to 17 years old):** Begin an open discussion about the hospital a few weeks before surgery. Actively involve your child when planning the surgery, and make sure they feel comfortable asking you and the surgeon questions.

## What are common fears my child may have about surgery?

Common worries before surgery include:

- Waking up in the middle of surgery
- Surgeons making mistakes or doing the wrong surgery
- Having a large surgical opening
- Being away from school and friends
- Having part of their body scarred or looking different after surgery
- Needle pokes
- Dying during or after surgery
- Being punished through surgery
- Having caregivers of the opposite gender
- Being physically exposed in any way
- Body image concerns
- Looking or acting differently than their friends

## How can I help my child be less worried about surgery?

To help relieve some of your child's fears:

- Help your child understand the reason for surgery or staying in the hospital.
- Tell your child that tests and surgeries are part of getting well.
- Reassure your child that hospital stays are never a punishment for bad behavior. Tell them they'll never go to the hospital for being bad but only to heal or get better.
- Tell your child you'll be with them before surgery and soon after they wake up after surgery.
- Explain that the anesthesiologist [AN-es-thee-zee-OLL-oh-jist] is a doctor who will give your child the right amount of sleeping medicine so they won't wake up during surgery.



## What do I need to do next?

- 1** Make sure your child understands that hospital stays aren't a punishment.
- 2** Answer your child's questions in an age-appropriate way.
- 3** Explain what happens the day of surgery, from arrival to recovery.

- Reassure your child that the medical team will scan their ID bracelet to make sure they give your child the right medicine and do the right surgery.
- Tell your child that the surgeon will mark the right place for surgery on your child's body.
- Explain that the surgeon makes the smallest openings possible, which are needed for surgery.

Even if your child's worries seem silly to you, let your child discuss them with you if they want to.

## How do I answer my child's questions about surgery?

**When talking with a younger child about surgery:**

- Start by asking what they know about the hospital or the surgery.
- Use simple, understandable answers.
- Explain what happens the day of surgery, from when they get to the hospital to when they're recovering from surgery.
- Describe what your child will see, hear, smell, taste, and feel before and after surgery
- Don't tell your child about things they won't directly experience (like what happens while they're asleep in the operating room) unless they specifically ask.
- Consider reading children's books about surgery and hospitals.



