

Preparing for your child's surgery

Having to prepare for yourself and your child for surgery can be a daunting task. This guide provides some suggestions to help you and your child feel as comfortable and informed as possible.

TELLING YOUR CHILD THEY NEED AN OPERATION

When explaining the need for surgery to your child, use age-appropriate language. Be honest and calm, providing clear but simple details about the process. Reassure them about the purpose of the operation, emphasising it is to help them feel better or address a health problem. Keep it simple, avoid too much technical detail.

HOW TO EXPLAIN ANAESTHESIA AND PAIN

It is important to describe anaesthesia in a way your child can relate to. Explain that an anaesthetist will help them go into a special sleep while the operation happens. This means they get to relax asleep while the doctors and nurses take care of everything. They won't feel or remember anything during the operation. Afterwards they might feel a little uncomfortable but that medicine will be available to make them feel better.

Reassure them that they will be closely monitored and cared for throughout the procedure and recovery and that their adult caregivers will be able to come and see them when they wake up. Avoid using the phrase 'put you to sleep' as some children will associate this with euthanasia of a pet.

HOW TO PREPARE THEM

- **Stories and visual aids:** Reading books or showing videos about hospital experiences can help children understand what to expect.
- **Familiarity:** Highlight what they can expect in terms of the environment, such as meeting nurses and doctors, without overwhelming them with technical details. For younger children, using storybooks or toys to illustrate the experience can help them understand.
- **Language:** Although some children are naturally inquisitive keeping your answers to questions and your descriptions clear and simple helps keep their imaginations in check.
- **Hospital tours:** If possible, arrange a visit to the hospital beforehand to familiarise them with the environment and reduce fear.

Preparing for your child's surgery

- **Packing:** Some children enjoy being involved in the preparation for going to hospital. You can get your child to help pack some comfort items, like a toy, blanket, or book. Don't forget to pack essentials such as pyjamas, toiletries, and any required medical documents.

OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENS

Older children and teens can understand a lot of the information that is given to them. Occasionally they may interpret the medical information incorrectly or they have searched the internet and found information that is not specific to their specific situation causing unnecessary worry. They may also struggle to articulate their concerns.

Finding the balance of giving them space to think, and a safe environment to discuss their understanding of the treatment plan is important. Sitting down together and going through any pre operative checklists or surgical information can be a good way to start a conversation to clarify their understanding and talk about particular worries.

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS AND ANXIETY AS PARENTS

Your emotional state significantly influences your child's anxiety levels. Practice relaxation techniques and approach the situation with calm confidence.

Being well-prepared helps:

- Attend pre-surgery clinic appointments to gather detailed information about the procedure and recovery.
 - It can help to take a second adult to these appointment as it is common not to remember everything that was discussed.
 - Write your questions down before the appointment and refer to the list during the appointment.
- Connect with other families who have gone through similar experiences for support and advice. Let us know if you want to be put you in touch with a family.

Preparing for your child's surgery

CATCH UP WITH YOUR GP

Your GP knows you and your child's history and can be a useful person to visit if you need to discuss how you or your child are managing. Psychology support is not typically funded in New Zealand through the public health system. For some people this might be beneficial and Visible Difference Aotearoa has some funding available to support people financially to gain access to psychological support. Get in touch to find out more.

YOU KNOW YOUR CHILD BEST

If there is anything you think the medical team caring for your child need to know to reduce stress for your child, let them know.

We hope this preparation will not only ease your child's journey but also give you peace of mind throughout the process.

If you have any other tips that helped your whānau, let us know and we'll add it to our list!

If you'd like to share your journey to help similar children and whānau please contact us and we'll make it happen.