
When Your Child Needs Surgery: Words to Use with Your Child

Your child is having surgery. Learn all you can about the surgery to help your child prepare. This sheet lists some of the common words and phrases that describe surgery. And it gives you tips for how to explain these words to your child. Ask a member of your child's healthcare team for help if you have questions. Some hospitals have specialists who support children through medical procedures and hospital stays. You and your child may also be able to get a tour of the building before the surgery date.

General tips

When speaking with your child about surgery, keep the following tips in mind:

- First, ask your child what they understand about the surgery. This gives you a starting point for your discussion.
- Discuss only what your child will be awake for and remember.
- Use short and simple words that your child knows.
- Be honest with your child. If your child asks questions, answer truthfully.

Surgery words and phrases

These are common words you'll hear about surgery:

- **Blood pressure cuff.** This is a device that is wrapped around the upper arm or the leg to check blood pressure. The cuff squeezes the arm or leg when blood pressure is measured.
 - Sample words to use: "the blood pressure cuff gives your arm or leg a hug"
 - Tip: Mention that the cuff will feel tight, but then becomes looser and looser.
- **Electrodes.** These are small sticky pads connected to wires that are placed on the chest or the legs to track the heartbeat during surgery.
 - Sample words to use: "stickers placed on your body to help the healthcare provider listen to your heart"
 - Tip: Mention that electrodes don't hurt.
- **Gurney.** This is a hospital bed with wheels.
 - Sample words to use: bed with wheels
 - Words not to use: stretcher
 - Tips: Let your child know that a gurney may be used to bring them into the operating room. Your child may also wake up on a gurney after surgery.
- **Nurse.** This is a healthcare provider who helps with your child's care in the hospital.

- Tips: Mention that a nurse may be a boy or a girl. Also let your child know that many different nurses will help with your child's care in the hospital.
- **Surgeon.** This is the healthcare provider who does your child's surgery.
 - Tip: Mention that a surgeon may be a boy or a girl.
- **Incision.** This is an opening made on the body by the surgeon to do the surgery.
 - Sample words to use: "opening that's made during surgery and is closed up when surgery is done"
 - Words not to use: cut open
 - Tips: Explain what an incision is and where it will be on the body. Mention that the incision will heal similarly to the way a scrape or cut heals. Reassure your child that the healthcare provider will make the smallest opening possible.
- **General anesthesia.** This is medicine that causes your child to fall asleep and not feel pain during surgery. There are several types of anesthesia, but general anesthesia is the most common type used for children. It can be given in gas form through a mask or in liquid form through an intravenous (IV) line. Reassure your child that they will remain asleep for the entire surgery and not wake before the procedure is done.
 - Sample words to use: sleep medicine or surgery sleep medicine
 - Words not to use: put to sleep and gas
 - Tips: Make sure your child understands that sleeping for surgery is different from sleeping at night. Reassure your child that the anesthesiologist will stop giving anesthesia when surgery is finished and that your child will wake up afterward.
- **Anesthesiologist or nurse anesthetist.** This is a healthcare provider or nurse who is trained to give anesthesia.
 - Sample words to use: surgery sleep healthcare provider
- **Mask.** This is used when your child receives general anesthesia in gas form. The mask covers the nose and mouth while your child breathes in the anesthesia.
 - Sample words to use: sleepy air
 - Words not to use: gas
 - Tip: Let your child know that the mask may have a flavoring. This is to improve the smell of the anesthesia when your child breathes it in.
- **IV (intravenous) line.** This is a thin flexible tube that is placed in a vein (blood vessel).
 - Sample words to use: "An IV is used to give your body things it needs, like medicine."
 - Tip: Let your child know that the letters "I" and "V" stand for "in your vein" and not "ivy" like the plant.

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- **Recovery room.** This is where your child will wake up after surgery. It is also often called the PACU (postanesthesia care unit).
 - Sample words to use: wake-up room
 - Tip: Let your child know that you will be in the recovery room with them if possible.