

Learning About General Anesthesia in Children

If your child needs surgery, a procedure, or a treatment, you may be worried or concerned.

It can help to know that your child's medical care team will use anesthesia to keep your child comfortable, relaxed, and free from pain.

General anesthesia is medicine that causes your child to become unconscious during the surgery.

This medicine affects their whole body.

Here's how it may be done.

Before your child gets general anesthesia, your child may be given medicines to help them relax and feel sleepy.

The anesthesia specialist will probably start your child's general anesthesia by having your child breathe anesthesia medicine through a mask.

Sometimes the medicine will be given through a tiny tube, called an I.V., in your child's vein.

The specialist will put a soft tube or other device in the back of your child's throat.

This is so your child can breathe in the anesthetic and oxygen.

Your child will be kept safe and comfortable throughout the surgery.

The anesthesia specialist will closely watch your child's heartbeat, breathing, blood pressure, and other vital functions.

And the anesthesia specialist will adjust your child's medicines as needed.

Now here's what you can expect after the procedure.

The time it will take for your child to come out of the anesthesia will depend on the medicines used and how their body responds to them.

Some children may feel nauseated and may vomit.

So your child might get medicine that can help.

And some children have a sore throat or hoarseness from the breathing tube.

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Your child may feel a little dizzy, unsteady, or tired.

Babies often sleep more than usual.

But all of these things are normal after general anesthesia.

Now let's learn about preparing for anesthesia.

Before your child gets any type of anesthesia, your child's doctor will check for anything that could affect anesthesia care.

And the doctor will discuss any risks and how your child may feel after the anesthesia.

For example, your child may need more time to rest.

It takes time for the effects of the medicine to wear off.

Tell your child's anesthesia specialist about any health problems your child has and if your child has had any other surgeries.

Also let the specialist know if a family member has had problems with anesthesia.

And tell the care team about any medicines and natural health products your child takes.

And here's something else you can prepare for.

The anesthesia specialist may ask you and—depending on your child's age— your child a lot of questions that seem personal.

They're not asking to judge you or your child.

They are asking because they want to keep your child safe.

For example, if you think that your child uses tobacco, marijuana, opioids, or any other drugs, let the anesthesia specialist know.

They may need to adjust the medicines to keep your child safe.

They will keep this information confidential.

Some hospital care teams include a child life specialist.

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If yours does, this person can help you and your child understand and prepare for the anesthesia.

And if the hospital staff says it's okay, let your child pick out things to bring to the hospital that can help comfort them before and after the procedure.

Now, if your child's surgery or procedure involves staying at the hospital, remember to bring the things your child needs to help them sleep, such as their blanket or a stuffed toy or a CPAP machine if they use one.

Thinking about your child "going under"

or being away from your child while they're getting surgery or a procedure may be stressful.

But knowing that your child's anesthesia specialist and the rest of the medical care team are trained and focused on helping your child stay safe and comfortable can help.

And if you have any questions or concerns, you can always talk to the anesthesia specialist.