

# tonsillectomy FAQ

## **what are tonsils and tonsillitis?**

Tonsils are clumps of tissue on both sides of the throat that help fight infections.

Tonsils may swell when they become infected (tonsillitis). If you look down your child's throat with a flashlight, the tonsils may be red and swollen or have a white or yellow coating on them. Other symptoms of tonsillitis can include:

- Sore throat
- Pain or discomfort when swallowing
- Fever
- Swollen glands (lymph nodes) in the neck

Enlarged tonsils without any symptoms are common among kids. Sometimes large tonsils can block the airway and cause difficulty breathing when asleep. Therefore, large tonsils can sometimes decrease the overall quality of sleep.

Don't rely on your own guesses, though — it can be hard to judge whether tonsils are infected. If you suspect tonsillitis, contact your doctor. Recurrent sore throats and infections should also be evaluated by the doctor, who may order a throat culture to check for strep throat.

## **when is surgery necessary?**

Doctors might recommend surgical removal of the tonsils, called a tonsillectomy, for a child who has one or more of the following:

- Persistent or recurrent tonsillitis or strep infections
- Swollen tonsils that make it hard to breathe, particularly during sleep
- Difficulty eating meat or chewy foods
- Sleep difficulty that might be affecting the child's daily activities
- Snoring and obstructive sleep apnea (when someone stops breathing for a few seconds at a time during sleep because enlarged tonsils are partially blocking the airway)



## what happens during surgery?

Surgery, no matter how common or simple the procedure, is often worrisome for kids and parents. You can help prepare your child for surgery by talking about what to expect. During the tonsillectomy:

- Your child will receive general anesthesia from a specialty-trained pediatric anesthesiologist. This means the surgery will be performed in an operating room so that an anesthesiologist can monitor your child.
- The surgery is done through your child's open mouth — without any incisions (cuts) through skin. This is done by a specialty-trained pediatric ENT surgeon. The operation will take about 20 minutes.
- Your child will wake up in the recovery area. Expect to spend several hours or perhaps overnight at the hospital. Many kids go home on the same day, though some may require observation overnight. In general, kids under three years old and those with significant sleep problems (like apnea) will usually stay overnight for observation.

Rarely, kids may show signs of bleeding, which would require a return to the operating room.

Depending on the surgical technique, the typical recuperation after a tonsillectomy may take up to a week or more. Expect some pain and discomfort due to the exposure of the throat muscles after the tonsils are removed. This can affect your child's ability to eat and drink and return to normal activities.

*This handout is for general information only and should not be considered complete. For more specific information, please ask your child's health care provider.*

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