

What to Expect After Head & Neck Surgery

RM Rosenfeld

After Surgery

When you greet your child in the recovery room, their mood will be unpredictable. Some children sleep peacefully (lucky you!), but others are very unhappy. Crying or agitation relate more to a sense of disorientation, than to active pain or discomfort. Fortunately, most children do not recall the hour or so they spend in the recovery room. When your child is ready, the anesthesiologist will allow them to eat and drink. Children having ambulatory surgery will return to the holding area, and those scheduled for overnight admission will proceed to the pediatric inpatient floor.

Taking Care of Stitches

Depending on the type of surgery your child has, the stitches may or may not need to be removed. *Absorbable stitches* do not require removal, and usually dissolve within 5 to 7 days. During this time keep the stitches dry and do not apply any ointment or creams. *Non-absorbable stitches* are removed in the office within 5 to 10 days after surgery. You may get non-absorbable stitches wet 48 hours after surgery, and may apply antibiotic ointment (Bacitracin or Neomycin) if the stitches itch or become uncomfortable.

Dealing with Pain

Pain is generally minimal after head and neck surgery, but you can minimize your child's discomfort by 1) encouraging adequate food and liquid intake, 2) distracting them with games and activities (new toys are particularly effective!), and by 3) reassuring them that within 2 to 3 days they should be getting back to normal. If the surgical area is initially sensitive, it may be covered with several fluffed-up gauze pads for cushioning. Over the counter pain medication (e.g., acetaminophen, ibuprofen) should be used, as needed, to reduce pain.

Some Things *Not* to Worry About

A *hoarse or abnormal voice* may occur for several days from the anesthesia tube. *Vomiting or nausea* may occur for up to 24 hours after anesthesia. *Discharge or oozing* may occur from the suture line for several days after surgery, and may be blood-tinged or pink in appearance; use a clean gauze pad or bandage to absorb any initial discharge. *Numbness* of the skin around the surgical incision is very common, and should gradually subside within several days or weeks. *Itching* may occur during the first one or two weeks; if necessary, prevent your child from scratching the area by keeping it covered or by trimming fingernails short.

When to Call Us

Call our office if 1) there is persistent or excessive bleeding from the surgical incision, 2) your child has inadequate food or beverage intake, 3) fever is 102 degrees or higher *despite* acetaminophen (Tylenol), 4) the skin *around* the sutures becomes swollen, red, or very tender (please note that some redness of the incision itself is normal), 5) the stitches break or the incision begins to open up, or 6) your child seems to be getting worse—not better—as the days go by. Your doctor will arrange a post-operative visit to check the healing process and remove sutures (if necessary).

I have received a copy of this information sheet.

Parent or Guardian _____ Relation to child _____

Child's name _____ Date _____