



What to Expect after Your Child Has Tonsillectomy/Adenoidectomy Surgery

What are tonsils and adenoids?

The tonsils are two soft tissue pads located on both sides of the back of the throat, just behind the teeth. Adenoids are located high in the throat behind the nose and the roof of the mouth. Tonsils and adenoids (T&A) are often removed when they become enlarged and block the upper airway, leading to breathing difficulty. They are also removed when tonsil infections or strep throat cannot be successfully treated by antibiotics.

What is tonsillectomy/adenoidectomy surgery?

The method to remove the tonsils is called a tonsillectomy; removal of the adenoids is an adenoidectomy. They are often performed together, called a tonsillectomy /adenoidectomy or T&A. T&A is an outpatient surgical procedure lasting between 30 and 45 minutes and performed under general anesthesia. Normally, a young patient will remain at the hospital or clinic for about four hours after surgery. Based on your child's age and your surgeon's choice, an overnight stay may be required.

When the tonsillectomy patient comes home

Most children require seven to ten days to recover from the surgery. Some may recover more quickly; others can take up to two weeks for a full recovery. Several concerns include:

Drinking: The most important action for recovery is that your child drink plenty of fluids. Offer water, juice, popsicles, and Jell-O. Avoid tart juices such as orange juice, as these may cause additional pain. Your surgeon may also recommend that milk products be avoided in the first 24 hours after surgery. Some patients experience nausea and vomiting after the surgery, caused by the general anesthetic. This usually occurs within the first 24 hours. Contact your physician if there are signs of not enough fluid intake (urination less than 2-3 times a day or crying without tears).

Eating: Generally, there are no food limits immediately after surgery, however most children do best with liquids and a soft food diet. The sooner the child eats and chews, the quicker the recovery. Tonsillectomy patients may be unwilling to eat because of sore throat pain, so some weight loss may occur, which is gained back after a normal diet is resumed.

Fever: A low-grade fever may be observed several days after surgery. Contact your physician if the fever is greater than 102°.

Activity: Light activity is recommended for several days after surgery. Activity may be increased slowly, with a return to school after normal eating and drinking start, pain medication stops, and your child sleeps through the night. Travel away from home is not recommended for two weeks following surgery, due to the risk of bleeding.

Breathing: You may notice abnormal snoring and mouth breathing due to swelling in the throat. Breathing should return to normal once the swelling subsides, about 10-14 days after surgery.

Scabs: A scab will form where the tonsils and adenoids were removed. These scabs are thick, white, and cause bad breath. This is not unexpected. Most scabs fall off in small pieces 5 to 10 days after surgery and are swallowed.

Bleeding: Except for small specks of blood from the nose or in the saliva, you should not see bright red blood. If such bleeding occurs, contact your physician immediately or take your child to the emergency room. Bleeding is an indication that the scabs have fallen off too early, and medical attention is required.

Pain: Nearly all children who have a T&A will have mild to severe pain in the throat after surgery. Some may complain of an earache, and a few may incur pain in the jaw and neck. Pain slowly stops over the course of the first week after surgery. If the pain gets worse or cannot be controlled, medical attention should be sought.

Pain control: Your physician will prescribe pain medication for your child. Generally, a liquid acetaminophen solution (like Tylenol) is recommended for regular doses after surgery. Acetaminophen suppositories may also be prescribed. Your physician will determine whether a narcotic medication such as codeine is appropriate. Experience suggests that pain control is best when enough fluids are taken.

***If you are troubled about any phase of your child's recovery, contact your physician immediately.**

For more information on kids' ear, nose, and throat health, visit www.entnet.org.