

Tonsillectomy - Post Operative Instructions

Surgery

Tonsillectomy (with or without Adenoidectomy) involves a brief anesthesia, typically 20 to 60 minutes. Patients may be irritable for several hours after surgery. If sedatives were given, some patients will remain sleepy for much of the day. You may have nausea or vomiting, but it usually goes away by the evening of surgery without additional medication.

Medication

Tonsillectomy is a painful procedure. Pain medications help but do not completely alleviate the discomfort.

Younger Children

Younger children should be given Tylenol Elixir and Motrin Elixir, with dosing based on weight. Start by giving scheduled Tylenol every 4 hours. If this does not control the pain, you can ALTERNATE between Tylenol and Motrin and give a dose every 3 hours (i.e. Tylenol given at 12 pm, then Motrin at 3 pm then Tylenol at 6 pm). Many children do not like the taste of liquid medications, so you may substitute Tylenol and Motrin chewables for an elixir prescription. It is fine to use generic store brands instead of brand name. You do not need to wait for your child to complain of pain to give them medication. Scheduled dosing of medications will control the pain more effectively.

Older children

Older children will be prescribed Lortab Elixir and can use Tylenol Elixir. You may use ONE OR THE OTHER every 4 hours (DO NOT give them at the same time). Try giving Tylenol scheduled every 4 hours. If the Tylenol Elixir does not help to relieve the pain, then substitute the Lortab Elixir for the next dose. Every time you give a dose of Lortab Elixir, do so with some food or full liquid to prevent nausea. The best thing to take with the medication is a cup of pudding or ice cream, a milkshake or cup of milk.

Adults

Adults will be prescribed a narcotic pain pill or elixir (Percocet, Norco, Vicodin, Lortab are some examples). Do not use aspirin products (Bayer's, Goode powders, Excedrin) – they may increase the chance of bleeding. Every time you take a dose of pain medication, do so with some food or milk to prevent nausea. The best thing to take with the medication is a cup of pudding or ice cream, a milkshake or cup of milk.

Activity

Vigorous exercise should be avoided for 14 days after surgery. The risk of bleeding is increased with increased activity and bleeding from where the tonsils were removed can happen for up to 2 weeks after surgery. Baths and showers are fine. Many patients have reduced energy levels until their pain decreases and they are taking in more nourishment and calories. You should not travel out of the local area for a full 2 weeks after surgery in case you experience bleeding after surgery.

Eating and Drinking

Dehydration is the biggest problem during the recovery period. It will increase pain, increase the risk of bleeding and delay the healing. It usually happens because the pain of swallowing keeps the patient from drinking enough liquids. Therefore, the key is to force fluids, and that works best when pain control is maximized.

You cannot drink too much after having a tonsillectomy. The only drinks to avoid are citrus like orange and grapefruit juices because they will burn the back of the throat. Incentive charts with prizes work very well to get young children to drink fluids and take their medications after surgery. Some patients will have a

small amount of liquid come out of their nose when they drink after surgery. This should stop within a few weeks after surgery.

Although drinking is more important, eating is fine even the day of surgery. Avoid foods that are crunchy or have sharp edges. Dairy products may be taken, if desired. You should avoid acidic, salty and spicy foods (especially tomato sauces). Chewing gum or bubble gum encourages swallowing and saliva flow, and may even speed up the healing. Almost everyone loses some weight after tonsillectomy (which is usually regained in the 2nd or 3rd week after surgery).

Drinking is far more important than eating in the first 14 days after surgery. Concentrate on drinking first and foremost. Adequate liquid intake probably speeds recovery.

General Information

- Recovery from tonsillectomy is a very painful period, often the worst pain people can recall. Please be understanding and patient with yourself or the patient you are caring for. It is helpful to take pain medicine during the night if the patient awakens-- the worst pain is usually in the morning. The pain may seem to increase 2 to 5 days after surgery – this is normal when inflammation sets in. Please be aware that no combination of medicines will eliminate the pain – the patient will need to continue eating/drinking in spite of the discomfort
- Pain is usually the worst in the morning. This can be avoided by taking medication overnight if needed
- Since moisture helps soothe the healing throat, a room humidifier (hot or cold) is suggested when the patient is sleeping
- Some patients feel pain relief by placing an ice collar on their neck (or a bag of frozen peas or corn). Be careful to avoid placing cold plastic directly on the skin – wrap in a paper towel or washcloth
- If the tonsils and adenoids are very large, the patient's voice may change after surgery
- You should not travel outside of the local area for 14 days after surgery in case significant bleeding occurs

After Surgery

Most patients have a significant amount of pain after tonsillectomy, with pain easing 7 to 14 days after surgery. Older children and adults seem to have more discomfort than younger children.

Ear pain: Many people will complain of earaches after tonsillectomy. This is caused by pain coming from the throat and not the ears. Give pain medications and encourage liquid intake.

Fever: Many patients have a low-grade fever after tonsillectomy – up to 101.5° F for several days. Higher prolonged fever should be reported to your surgeon.

Bad looking (and bad smelling) throat: After surgery, the place where the tonsils were removed is covered with a white film, which is a moist scab. This usually develops 3-5 days after surgery and falls off 10 to 14 days after surgery. The scab usually causes bad breath. There will be some redness and swelling as well. The uvula (the part of the throat that hangs down in the middle between the tonsils) is usually swollen for several days after surgery.

Sore/bruised feeling of tongue: This is common for the first few days after surgery because the tongue is pushed out of the way to take out the tonsils during surgery.

Reason's to Call Your Surgeon's Office

Nausea/vomiting: This is a common side effect from general anesthesia and can last up to 24-36 hours after surgery. Try giving sips of clear liquids like Sprite, water, or apple juice. Then gradually increase fluid intake. If the nausea or vomiting continues beyond this time frame, call the doctor's office for medications that will help relieve the nausea and vomiting.

Bleeding: Significant bleeding is rare, but it happens to about 5% of patients who have tonsillectomy. It may come from the nose, the mouth, or be vomited or coughed up. Ice water or mouthwashes may help stop or reduce bleeding. If you have bleeding that does not stop, you should call the office (during business hours) or the on-call physician (evenings, weekends) or go to the emergency room if you are very concerned.

Dehydration: If there has been little or no liquid intake for 24 hours, the patient may need to come to the hospital for IV fluids. Signs of dehydration include lethargy, lack of tears when crying and reduced or very concentrated urine output.

High fever: If the patient has a consistent temperatures greater than 102°F, or when accompanied by cough or difficulty breathing, you should call the doctor's office.

If you run out of pain medication: Some patients run out of pain medications prescribed after surgery. If you need more, call the office **DURING BUSINESS HOURS**. Keep an eye on your prescription so that you don't run out completely before you can pick up more, especially before the weekend.