

What to Expect After Tonsillectomy

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Tonsillectomy with or without adenoidectomy is done most commonly for obstructive sleep apnea or recurrent infections. The severity of sleep apnea and other medical factors determines whether this is done as an outpatient (home the same of surgery) or requires an overnight stay at the hospital. Things that normally occur after tonsillectomy are:

1. Throat and ear pain – Pain in the ears is called “referred pain” as the same nerve pathways give sensation to the tonsils and the ear.
2. Fever – Low fevers < 102 occasionally occur during the first couple days after surgery. This typically goes away with the pain medicine.
3. Bad breath – This is common until the lining behind the tonsils has completely healed at around 2 weeks. This will go away. Brush the teeth gently, especially in back not to traumatize the area during healing.
4. White patches with some surrounding redness. This is not an infection but the normal healing process. The tonsils heal the same way a scab on your knee does and when it gets wet it turns white. In the tonsils healing is taking place underneath the scab and it is white from saliva.

Pain Medication - See Dr. VandeGriend’s pain medication sheet for instructions.

Bleeding

The most serious complication of tonsillectomy is significant bleeding. This occurs about 2% of the time. It can happen soon after surgery but most commonly around 7-10 days after surgery when the scabs on blood vessels start to fall off. If you have a small amount of bleeding (small streak of blood in the saliva) make sure to rest and be very careful with eating for a day or 2. Significant bleeding is usually obvious and you should go immediately to the hospital or call 911.

Eating and Drinking

Since your throat will be very sore after surgery, many people have to force themselves to drink during the first week. This is very important because not drinking can cause you to become dehydrated and also increases the risk of bleeding. Eating on the other hand is not necessary and you can eat as much or as little as you want and long as the food is soft and not sharp. Losing some weight after surgery is not uncommon. Foods like chips, pretzels, and hard tacos are sharp and can increase bleeding. Try to avoid foods that are tough and need to be chewed extensively. This is very important for the first 2 weeks. Foods like pasta, rice, beans, mashed potatoes, moist chicken etc. are fine.

Activity and Time Off

Most people have significant pain during the first week and by 2 weeks are about back to normal. Young children tend to recover much faster than adults. Most people will need 2 weeks off of school/work however some may only need 1 week. Avoid strenuous activity and heavy lifting for 2-3 weeks.

It is very important that you not travel and have someone readily available to help if needed during the first 2-3 weeks. Serious problems that occur due to bleeding usually involve not having fast enough help to be able to get medical care.