

Tonsillectomy: Surgery to remove your tonsils

This information sheet has been given to you to help answer some of the questions you might have about your tonsillectomy surgery. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives to this procedure. It also outlines what you can expect if you decide to have the surgery. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak with your doctor or nurse.

What is a tonsillectomy?

A tonsillectomy is the surgical removal of the tonsils. The tonsils are two small almond-shaped mounds of lymphatic tissue that sit on either side of the back of the throat. They are part of your body's system to fight infection and are only important during the first few years of life.

This surgery is normally performed as a day case, which means you will come into hospital for the procedure and leave on the same day. It is performed under a general anaesthetic, which means you will be asleep for the entire operation.

Why do I need a tonsillectomy?

A tonsillectomy is usually suggested if you have:

- recurrent episodes of tonsillitis or quinsy – an infection of the tonsils which can cause a severe sore throat, high temperature and difficulty swallowing
- swollen tonsils that cause you to snore or hold your breath at night
- swollen tonsils that make it harder to breathe or swallow
- sore throats that often interrupt your work or every day life.

What are the benefits?

Your general health may improve – removing your tonsils will prevent further episodes of tonsillitis. You may still get sore throats, but this should not occur as often.

Are there any alternative treatments?

You may choose not to have your tonsils removed. Episodes of tonsillitis can be treated with antibiotics and pain relief.

If you do not have swollen tonsils removed, you could develop other problems. Although rare, potential problems include an abscess forming, rheumatic fever, a very high fever or breathing difficulties. Please speak to your doctor for more information.

Asking for your consent

Before your surgery, you will need to sign a consent form. This confirms that you understand what the procedure involves and wish to go ahead. You should receive the leaflet, **Helping you decide: our consent policy**, which gives you more information. If you have not, please ask us for a copy.

What are the risks of having a tonsillectomy?

There are risks associated with any surgery. Your doctor will explain these risks to you before asking you to sign the consent form. Please ask questions if you are uncertain. Possible problems from this surgery are:

- a **sore throat** for about 10 to 14 days after the operation, which includes difficulty swallowing
- **bleeding**. This can happen up to two weeks after the operation.
- an **infection**
- **damaged teeth** (please let us know if you have any loose, capped, or crowned teeth)
- **complications from the general anaesthetic**. The anaesthetist will explain these risks to you in more detail. You should receive a copy of the **Having an anaesthetic** leaflet which explains the risks and complications associated with general anaesthesia.
- There is also a risk of death with any operation. The risk is extremely small for this type of surgery.

What happens before the surgery?

We will give you an appointment to attend a pre-assessment clinic before your surgery. The pre-operative assessment nurse will check your general health and may carry out some tests. These are to make sure that you are fit enough to have the anaesthetic and surgery. The nurse will also explain how you need to prepare for your surgery. It is important that you follow the instructions given to you by your doctor or nurse.

You should also receive a copy of the leaflets, **Having an anaesthetic** and **Admission to the Surgical Admissions Lounge (SAL) and Day Surgery Unit (DSU)**. These leaflets give you information about surgery, how to prepare for it, what to bring with you on the day of your procedure and when you can expect to go home. If you do not have a copy of either, please ask us for one. Alternatively, you can download these leaflets from the Guy's and St Thomas' website at: <http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/patients/patient-leaflets/a-z-of-leaflets.aspx>

You will need to fast before having a general anaesthetic. Fasting means that you cannot eat or drink anything (except water) for six hours before surgery. We will give you clear instructions about this and when to start fasting. Further details are provided in the **Having an anaesthetic** leaflet.

If you smoke, please stop smoking at least 48 hours before your surgery. Smoking increases the risk of complications such as a chest infection or DVT. It can also delay wound healing. For help on giving up smoking, please speak to your nurse or call the **NHS Smoking Helpline** on **0800 169 0 169**.

Pregnancy testing

All sexually active women of childbearing age will need a pregnancy test. This is to make sure that the general anaesthetic does not disturb an early pregnancy. Please use a barrier method of contraception, such as a condom or diaphragm, before your operation.

On the day of the operation, we will ask your permission to perform a pregnancy test – you will need to give us a urine specimen for this. Your surgery will be cancelled if there is any possibility that you might be pregnant.

What happens during the operation?

The operation is performed through the mouth, meaning there will be no external (outside) cuts or scars. It generally takes about 30 to 45 minutes.

After the surgery, you will be taken to the recovery room, where you will come round from the anaesthetic.

After my tonsillectomy, when can I go home?

You can leave hospital on the same day as the operation, once you are able to eat and drink. However, you will need to stay for six hours after your procedure so you can be observed for bleeding.

What should I look out for at home?

You might feel tired. Please rest on the day you go home and the following day. This will help you to recover from the general anaesthetic. Your throat will look white in colour and may develop scabs while it heals. This is normal.

Will I have any pain?

You will have a sore throat when you wake up and this can last for a few days, and can also increase during the first few days. This is because there will be two areas in the throat where the tonsils were removed, which will take about 10 to 12 days to heal completely.

Some patients have an earache after the surgery. This is because the tonsils share some of the same nerves. This is normal and should go away in about two to three days. If it does not, please see your GP.

Some patients tell us that chewing gum or sucking ice helps with their pain, and can be especially beneficial if you have associated ear pain.

Medications

We will give you painkillers to take home with you and explain how to take each painkiller so that you receive the maximum pain relief.

It is important that you take your painkillers as prescribed and on a regular basis for the first few days. When taken regularly, the medication remains at a constant level in your body and controls your pain better. After a few days, you can gradually reduce the medication until you no longer need it. Please contact your GP or the hospital (on **020 71881734**) if your pain is difficult to control.

We will explain any medicine that we give to you before you leave hospital. If you are at all uncertain, please contact the hospital or your GP for advice.

Some of the medication we will give you contains paracetamol, so you must not mix this with other medicines that also contain paracetamol. **It is important that you do not exceed the recommended daily dose of any medication you are given. Please make sure you read the label.**

Bleeding

You may spit out small amounts of blood-stained saliva for the first day after the operation – this is normal.

Occasionally patients swallow a small amount of blood during the operation. This can make you sick, so do not worry if you are sick and notice a small amount of dark red blood in your vomit.

If you spit out or vomit bright red blood or large clots at any time, please go to the nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department immediately.

About five out of 100 adults will return to hospital with bleeding which may need admission for observation or treating. Only one in a 100 will need to have a second operation to stop the bleeding.

Sutures

You may have sutures (stitches). These usually dissolve on their own within three weeks after the operation. They do not usually need to be removed and will fall out by themselves.

Can I eat and drink as normal after the operation?

Keep drinking plenty of fluids. You should be able to eat and drink as you normally would a day after the operation. A healthy, balanced diet will help your wound to heal and prevent an infection.

Keep the healing area where the tonsils were clean by eating foods like toast and cereal. This may be difficult to do, but will help your throat to heal by removing any dead tissue. Taking your painkillers 45 minutes before a mealtime may make it more comfortable to eat.

Can I brush my teeth as normal?

It is important that you brush your teeth after the operation. This will help to prevent infections and help the sore areas heal more quickly. It will also freshen your mouth.

When can I go back to work?

You may well find that it takes a couple of weeks to get 'back to normal'. We encourage you to rest for the first few days and gradually get back to your normal routine.

We recommend that you take 10-14 days off work. During this time, you should try to avoid large groups of people, people with coughs and colds and smoky or dusty environments. This is because you are more vulnerable to picking up an infection while your throat is healing.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?

You will not usually need a follow-up appointment. We will tell you before you go home if one is needed.

What if there is a problem at home?

Please contact the **Day Surgery Unit** on 020 7188 1734 (weekdays 8am to 7pm) or your GP if you have:

- a high temperature (38°C/100F or above)
- difficulty taking fluids
- your painkillers are not controlling your pain.

Please go straight to your nearest Accident & Emergency (A&E) department if you are:

- bringing up bright red, black or brown vomit – this may be blood and needs to be checked
- spitting out bright red blood or large clots; or
- having difficulty breathing.

St Thomas' Hospital

020 7188 7188

King's College Hospital

020 3299 9000

Please note that there is no A&E at Guy's Hospital.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your tonsillectomy, please contact the nurses at the **Day Surgery Unit** on **020 7188 1734** , (Monday to Friday, 8am to 7pm).

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

e: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)

For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital.

t: 020 7188 3416

Language support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 **fax:** 020 7188 5953

NHS Direct

Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 0845 4647 **w:** www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

Become a member of your local hospitals, and help shape our future

Membership is free and it is completely up to you how much you get involved. To become a member of our Foundation Trust, you need to be 18 years of age or over, live in Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth or Westminster or have been a patient at either hospital in the last five years. To join:

t: 0848 143 4017 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk

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