

Tips to Help Your Child with Autism Prepare for and Cope with Surgery

Every child and youth have unique needs and as caregivers, you are the expert of your child. Don't be afraid to inform hospital staff what helps your child cope. A pre-anesthetic care nurse may reach out to you prior to your surgery and can create a 'Balance Tool' to inform the team of any sensory sensitivities, triggers or communication tools staff should be aware about. If you would like to reach out to a Child Life Specialist in the Anesthetic Care Unit prior to your arrival to discuss additional coping strategies, please send them an email to [connect](#).

Potential stressors while in hospital:

- Confined spaces
- Change in routine
- Unpredictable and/or sudden changes
- Changes from one activity to another
- Change in environment
- Loud and/or unfamiliar noises
- Overstimulation or lack of stimulation
- Crowded waiting areas
- Unfamiliar fabrics (e.g. dressing gowns, hospital tape, etc.)
- Physical touch from others
- Bright lights
- Multiple people in the child's space
- Different tastes from medications
- Waiting (please plan for possible long wait times)

Strategies for Preparing:

- Talk to your child about what to expect on the day of their surgery (what will they **feel, taste, smell, hear, see?** Who will they meet?). Use words and pictures that they can understand. You can use a [Preparation Book](#) as a resource
- Care Plans – let your nurse, child life specialist, anesthesiologist, or other healthcare professional know more about your child so that a plan of care can be developed
- De-sensitization sessions - Some children benefit from having “practice sessions” to rehearse what their experience will be on the day of surgery. Connect with the ACU Child Life Specialist if you are interested in scheduling this.
- Prepare your child for possible long wait-times
- Consider if your child needs any pre-operative sedation or medication prior to arrival to the surgery unit or the operating room. Discuss this with the healthcare staff, such as during your phone call with the nurse the day prior to surgery.

Strategies for Coping:

- Bring your child's favourite comfort or distraction items on the visit (i.e. sensory toys, music, tablets, etc.)
- Have appropriate tools for communication (e.g. First/Then Boards, Picture Exchange Communication Symbols (PECS) if your child is non-verbal)
- Provide realistic choices (e.g. choice between waiting in the assessment room or in the playroom) vs. unrealistic choices (choice of having surgery or fasting)
- Break down routines into smaller steps (e.g. doing nursing checkup one step at a time rather than multiple steps at once.)
- Be honest with your child. You can describe the feeling of a needle as a "strong pinch"
- Be specific and simple in your language
- Use [one voice](#) for any instructions and request less people in your child's space if possible
- Use visuals, such as a timer, to indicate any need for transitions or waiting
- Praise specific behaviours (e.g. you did a great job holding your arm still)
- Utilize visual tools to communicate feelings or levels of pain (e.g. [PAIN Faces scale](#))
- Try to utilize any relaxation or distraction strategies (e.g. deep breathing) before your child becomes worried rather than just after they have become upset
- Do not hesitate to let staff know of any strategies you use to best support your child. You are your child's best advocates.