



DECISION AID

Enlarged tonsils: Is surgery necessary?

Your child has been diagnosed with enlarged palatine tonsils, often simply called “tonsils.” He or she may also have enlarged adenoids.

Enlarged tonsils or adenoids can make the airways narrower. As a result, your child may breathe mainly through their mouth, snore loudly or even stop breathing for a few seconds at a time while sleeping. This disturbs their sleep. Enlarged tonsils or adenoids can increase the risk of certain diseases and affect the child’s development.

A doctor may have suggested that your child has surgery. This is sometimes the only way to improve the symptoms. But surgery isn’t always necessary.

The aim of this decision aid is to help you choose a suitable treatment together with your doctors.

THESE ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS:

- Wait and see whether the symptoms get better on their own.
- Tonsil surgery

Enlarged adenoids can be removed during this operation too. If your child also has persistent glue ear due to middle ear infections, the glue ear can be treated during the operation as well. Doctors then often recommend the use of grommets (ear tubes).

PERSONAL DECISION

This short decision aid probably won’t include all of the information that you need. You will still need to talk to a doctor, but the decision aid can help you. The treatment decision will depend on various things, including

- how severe your child’s symptoms are,
- how long they have had the symptoms for,
- how enlarged their tonsils or adenoids are,
- whether their breathing difficulties could be caused by something else too, and
- whether they also have other medical conditions.

IMPORTANT: Don’t let anyone pressure you into choosing a certain treatment! Take the time to gather information and make the decision.

PROS AND CONS OF THE TREATMENTS

	“Wait-and-see” approach	Tonsil surgery (including removal of adenoids if necessary)
What does the treatment involve?	The symptoms are observed over a period of several weeks or months. The child has regular check-ups. If the adenoids are enlarged too, steroid nasal sprays can sometimes help to improve the child’s breathing.	In most cases, only part of the tonsils are removed (partial tonsillectomy, or tonsillotomy). The complete removal of the tonsils (total tonsillectomy) is rarely recommended. The operation is typically performed in a hospital.
Does it help?	Sometimes the symptoms improve on their own. But it’s not possible to predict whether this will happen. The likelihood might depend on the size of the tonsils or adenoids.	Most of the children who have surgery can already breathe normally again soon afterwards. They can sleep a lot better and are more rested. Both the partial and total removal of the tonsils relieve the symptoms equally well. But the symptoms might return.
What are the possible disadvantages?	The symptoms may not go away, or they could get worse. If sleep problems remain untreated, they could have health consequences over the long term.	General risks associated with surgery (e.g. related to anaesthesia). Temporary pain and trouble swallowing may occur after the surgery. These symptoms are more severe if the tonsils are removed completely. Bleeding after surgery: This occurs in less than 1 out of 100 children whose tonsils are partially removed. The risk is probably somewhat higher if the tonsils are removed completely. Children who have after-surgery bleeding may need further surgery.
Who is the treatment suitable for?	For children with minor sleep problems.	For most children whose enlarged tonsils are causing more major problems.

HELP WITH YOUR DECISION

You may still be unsure about which treatment you would prefer. You can write down your thoughts and questions on the following two pages.

Which treatment would I consider?		What do I like about it?	What don't I like about it?
“Wait-and-see” approach / No treatment	<input type="radio"/>		
Tonsil surgery (including removal of adenoids if necessary)	<input type="radio"/>		

If you still aren't sure: What else do you need in order to make a decision?

With all the different pros and cons to consider, it can be hard to choose a treatment. But it is often possible to wait at first. If your child's symptoms don't improve, you can still consider surgery then.

If you need more help:

- You will find links to further information on the next page.
- You can talk to your doctor again.
- You can also talk to a different doctor. You will find information about this option on the next page, too.
- You can talk about it with your friends and family.



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You will find in-depth information about the following topics on the internet:

- Enlarged tonsils and adenoids, including the treatment options:
www.informedhealth.org/enlarged-tonsils
- Detailed information on second medical opinions:
www.informedhealth.org/SecondOpinion

Preparing for the doctor's appointment

Do you still have any questions? What are you most concerned about? Write down any questions or thoughts you may have, and take this decision aid with you to the appointment. You can ask the doctor about anything you would like to know or discuss anything you are worried about.

You will find a list of questions – and can choose those that are most important to you – here:

- www.informedhealth.org/questions

Publishing details

This decision aid was developed by the Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG, Germany). You will find information about our work and the sources we use here:

- www.informedhealth.org/our-approach

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