

Talking to Your Children About Bariatric Surgery

For parents who are having weight-loss surgery

Bariatric surgery is life-changing, not only for you but also for your friends and family. It's important to talk to your loved ones, especially children, about your decision to have surgery.

Read this handout to learn how to talk to children about:

- Why it is important to talk about your surgery
- Reasons for having surgery
- What to expect before and after surgery
- Where to get more information



The first time you talk with your children about your surgery will probably not be the last.

Talking openly and often with them before and after your surgery will help everyone cope with the changes to come.

Why is it important to talk about my surgery with my children?

1. You are going to lose a lot of weight very quickly.

Children notice the changes that happen around them. They may worry that you are sick. This may make them feel stressed or worried.

Your instinct may be to avoid telling your children about your weight-loss surgery. However, talking to your children can help you work together in order for you to prepare and recover from your surgery.

2. Open communication increases trust and shows you value and respect them.

Children and teenagers communicate feelings, such as uncertainty, confusion, fear or worry, in different ways. Some use words, while others use their actions to communicate. Pay attention to changes in their words and actions and talk to your children about their concerns.

Here are some tips that may help you to talk to your children about your weight-loss surgery:

- ✓ Try to encourage your children to ask questions or tell you their concerns, while sharing your own concerns with them
- ✓ Try not to argue about your decision to have the surgery
- ✓ Focus on your health and quality-of-life as the reasons for having the surgery

Ask us if you need help talking to your children about your surgery. We may be able to give you more information or resources.

How do I answer common questions about bariatric surgery with my children?

Why are you having surgery?

Children may ask why you are having surgery because they are curious, protective or maybe because they worry about their own weight.

When you answer, it is important that they know you are having the surgery because of your **health**. This can make them less sensitive to their own body image issues.

Your answer for why you are getting this surgery should make sense to you. When you are sure about your reasons, you can be more clear and honest with your children.

For example:

“I am getting surgery on my stomach so that I can be healthy.”

“The doctor and I have decided that this surgery will help me be healthier.”

“I am going to lose weight because my stomach will be smaller.”

“This will help me have a lot more energy than before. I will be able to do things like go to the park, or play sports with you.”

“I will be much healthier and will not have to take as many medications as before.”

The goal is to focus on being healthy. This does not always mean that you have to lose weight or be skinny to be healthy. **Healthy looks different to every person.**

There are some useful resources at the end of this brochure if your child is having trouble with their own body image or self-esteem because of their weight.

When will you have weight-loss surgery?

Tell your children about your plans for weight-loss surgery ahead of time.

- Don't tell them too early or they may have a lot of time to worry, but give them enough time to talk about any questions they may have.
- Every child is different, but we suggest talking to children a few weeks to 1 month before surgery. It might be best to tell teenagers earlier so they have more time to talk about their concerns with you.
- Be sure to talk to your children only when you are sure you will have weight-loss surgery and when you have a surgery date.

Who will take care of me?

Whether it is a spouse, relative or friend, let your children know that there is a plan in place.

Before surgery

Find the right time and place to talk to your children about your weight-loss surgery.

Think about the most stress-free way for your child to begin a talk about your surgery.

- Is a formal family meeting or just a casual conversation best?
- Are there distractions? Turn off cellphones, computers and televisions.

Reassure your children that you are in good hands, and that the doctors and nurses are going to be giving you the best care possible.

Let them know:

- How long you will be in the hospital
- If they can visit you in the hospital
- What to expect when they see you

For younger children:

Keep your words simple.

Explain what children can expect, and how schedules may change. Reassure them that they will be taken care of and will not be forgotten while you recover from surgery.

For example:

“The doctor will help me make some changes to my stomach so that I can be healthier. Mom/Dad will go to hospital for a few days so that I can come out healthier, but you can visit me during this time with (partner or another supporter)”.

Or if you plan on not having your child visit you at the hospital, “Mom/Dad will be away, but (partner or another supporter) will stay with you to make sure you can still (their favourite activity or activities in their daily schedule)”.

For older children:

Older children or teenagers may ask about the details of your surgery. Let them guide the discussions, based on how much they already know, and how much they want to know about the surgery. Be honest and open, and try to use language they are familiar with.

For example:

Start with questions such as:

“Have you heard about ‘bariatric surgery’?”
or “Do you know what bariatric surgery is?”.

Then explain the basic facts of surgery using language they understand. Let them know they can come back to you after the first discussion if they have any questions, concerns, or feel overwhelmed.

When explaining about the surgery, consider saying:

“The surgery will make my stomach smaller to help me become healthier.”

Children may also be curious about SlimTime® or Optifast® (nutritional meal replacements). Let them know that SlimTime® and Optifast® help your body get ready for the surgery.

After surgery

You may feel tired and weak after your surgery. It is helpful to let your children know that your body needs time to heal and feel better.

Liquid diet and portion control

Eating habits such as portion sizes and food choices is an important topic to cover with your children.

- Tell them that while your stomach is recovering, you can only eat certain foods, in small amounts. As your stomach starts to feel better, you will be able to start eating regular foods again.
- Even though you will not eat the same food or portion size that you used to, explaining what to expect in the future lets your children adjust to the short-term effects of the surgery.
- Make the connection to food, your body and overall health and talk about the changes in a clear and positive way.



Next steps and resources

- ✓ The more you prepare ahead of time, the easier it is to adjust to changes after surgery. If your children start to get used to the long-term changes before your surgery, it will be easier for them to adjust after your surgery.
- ✓ Remember to focus on the positives. You can talk to your children about their hopes, changes they want, and new activities you can do together as a family.
- ✓ Telling your children about your plans for bariatric surgery and asking them to share their thoughts shows that you are interested in what they have to say.

Contact us

The team at the Bariatric Surgery Program is here to help support you. If you would like more support, or tips on ways to talk to your children about your bariatric surgery, please contact the Social Workers at the clinic.

Bariatric Surgery Program

Toronto Western Hospital

4th Floor East Wing

399 Bathurst Street

Toronto, ON M5T 2S8

Hours: Mondays to Fridays,
8:00 am to 5:00 pm

Phone: 416 603 5800 extension 6145
(leave a message for a
Social Worker)

Fax: 416 603 5142

Discussing bariatric surgery with children: Information on body image and other resources

Elementary Teachers Foundation of Ontario: Body Image Project

Website: www.etfo.ca/SupportingMembers/Resources/Pages/BodyImageProject.aspx

NEDIC (National Eating Disorders Information Centre)

Website: www.nedic.ca/know-facts/body-image-self-esteem

AboutKidsHealth (The Hospital for Sick Children): Promoting Positive Body Image

Website: www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=625&language=English

Visit the Toronto Western Hospital Patient & Family Library

Location: TWH Main Atrium, West Wing

Phone: 416 603 6722



Have feedback about this document?

Please fill out our survey. Use this link: surveymonkey.com/r/uhn-pe

Visit www.uhnpatienteducation.ca for more health information. Contact pfep@uhn.ca to request this brochure in a different format, such as large print or electronic formats.

© 2021 University Health Network. All rights reserved. Use this material for your information only. It does not replace advice from your doctor or other health care professional. Do not use this information for diagnosis or treatment. Ask your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. You may print 1 copy of this brochure for non-commercial and personal use only.