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’s important to talk about your surgery
- What to expect before and after surgery
- Reasons for having surgery
- Where to get more information

Please visit the UHN Patient Education website for more health information: www.uhnpatienteducation.ca

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Author: Adina Muskat and Monica Chi
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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?**

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 could make them feel stressed or worried.

   You may want to avoid telling them about your weight-loss surgery, but, talking to your children can help you work together to focus on how to prepare and recover from your surgery.

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

   Some 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 any changes 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 child to ask questions or tell you their concerns and try to do the same for them
- ✔ Try not to argue about your decision to have the surgery
- ✔ Focus on your health as the reason for 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 to talk to children about bariatric surgery —
questions they might ask

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.

How to talk to children about bariatric surgery — younger versus older children

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.

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**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 a small open in my stomach to help me become healthier.”

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Children may also be curious about Optifast© (nutritional meal replacement). Let them know that Optifast© helps 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 to show that 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 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.

The Bariatric Surgery Program
The University of Toronto Collaborative
Bariatric Surgery Program
Toronto Western Hospital

Bariatric Clinic
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
Want more information to help you explain bariatric surgery?

YWCA Body Image Fact Sheet
http://ywcagirlspace.ca/articles.php?subject=51

Elementary Teachers Foundation of Ontario: Body Image Brochure

NEDIC (National Eating Disorders Information Centre)
www.nedic.ca/knowthefacts/bodyimage.shtml

Visit the Toronto Western Hospital Patient & Family Library to get a copy of any of the resources above.
Location: TWH Main Atrium, West Wing
📞 Phone: 416-603-6722