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INSTRUCTIONS FOR CARE AFTER TONSILLECTOMY or TONSILLECTOMY AND ADENOIDECTOMY

General Information

A tonsillectomy, or removal of the tonsils, is usually performed for recurring infections of the tonsils or for obstruction of the airway related to enlarged tonsils. This operation is performed under a general anesthesia and usually requires a breathing tube and intravenous line.

Recovery Time

Most patients require a recovery time of one week. One should plan on being out of work, school or day-care for this week. Recovery time varies between individuals and some people recover one or two days earlier or later than one week and may return to their usual daily activity at that time. The individual or family should use their judgment in making the determination when to return to the usual daily activity. Vigorous activities and sports should be avoided for approximately two weeks.

Dietary Instructions

Patients may eat or drink anything they desire after undergoing a tonsillectomy. Due to the discomfort, patients usually eat less food during the first week after surgery. It is imperative that adequate fluids be given and many patients will need encouragement to be sure that this occurs. Popsicles, slushes and ice cream are often favorites for many tonsillectomy patients. Failure to have an adequate fluid intake may require a return to the hospital for intravenous fluids. Contact the ENT office or physician on call if the patient is not taking fluids.

Medications

Patients may resume their normal medications after surgery unless instructed by the physician. Aspirin and ibuprofen products should be avoided unless directed by the physician. Medications prescribed at the time of surgery usually include pain medication and antibiotics. These should be given as instructed. These medications may be held if the patient is experiencing nausea and vomiting. The medications also should be discontinued if a rash or suspected allergic reaction develops.

Pain Management

A prescription for pain medication is typically given after the tonsillectomy. This should be given every four hours while the patient is awake during the first four days. This will allow for better control of pain. A child should not be awakened to give them medication, however. After the first four days, the pain medication may be given as needed. In addition, if the patient is doing well, then one may substitute the usual dose of Tylenol for the prescription pain medication at that time to lessen the side effects of the prescription pain medication. Inadequate fluid intake and less frequent medication use than recommended will often cause the patient to become more uncomfortable.

Nausea and Vomiting

Nausea and vomiting occur occasionally after surgery. Although this is not to be routinely expected, it does occur in a number of patients. This may be caused by the sensations at the surgical site, the medications given for anesthesia, the pain medication or antibiotics given, or occasionally by an unrelated but coincidental intestinal infection.

If nausea and vomiting occur, one should hold off on giving the antibiotics and prescription pain medicines until the nausea and vomiting have subsided. The diet should also be limited to small sips of water or ice chips initially. Clear liquids, such as pop or juice, should be given next after the water is tolerated.

Tylenol® suppositories can be given to help with discomfort when a person is having difficulties with nausea and vomiting. The suppositories may be found in the pharmacy without a prescription.

If the patient has been given a prescription to be used in case of nausea or vomiting, this should be given as prescribed.

If vomiting is occurring frequently or has persisted through the night, the ENT office or ENT on-call physician should be contacted.

Other Expectations

The area from which the tonsils were removed will usually develop a membrane that is white or gray. This is normal and we usually do not recommend that the family members check the throat on a routine basis.

A temperature rise may occur after tonsillectomy. We usually do not recommend that the temperature be checked on a routine basis unless the patient is doing very poorly. Use of the pain medication, antibiotics and adequate hydration are needed to help minimize the development of any temperature elevation. It is not unusual to see a temperature elevation of up to 102°.

If a temperature elevation is noted, first ensure that adequate hydration, use of pain medication and antibiotics is being carried out. The next step would be to give the patient a cool bath or a cool sponge bath. If several hours after this the temperature remains elevated above 101.5°, the ENT office or ENT on-call physician should be contacted.

It is not uncommon for patients to complain of discomfort or pain in their ears. This is normal after a tonsillectomy and is due to the interconnections of the nerves in the head and neck. No special treatment is required for this. The usual pain medication should be given.

Bleeding

Bleeding is not expected after a tonsillectomy but does occur occasionally. It is usually obvious when it does occur. The patient will either be spitting out bright red blood or dark blood clots. Occasionally, a patient who has recently been bleeding will vomit and dark blood clots will be noted at this time. The ENT office or ENT on-call physician should be contacted immediately if persistent or profuse bleeding is noted. The family should try to remain calm as the bleeding is usually not life threatening but the situation does require immediate assessment.

To contact the ENT office, call 488-5600 between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday except on holidays. For emergencies after hours, please call 473-7918. One of the ENT physicians is on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Do not call Physicians' Surgical Center for any emergencies.