

Making your child's test or procedure less stressful – advice to help you and your family

Consumer Information

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Understand the purpose of the test and what it involves

It is normal to have some fear of the unknown, and this fear can be reduced by understanding the reason the doctor has requested the test. In some cases the test will be to identify a disease, condition or injury that the doctor suspects is present or may be present. In other cases it will be to make sure that the child does not have a disease, condition or injury.

It is important to understand what the consequences of the suspected disease, condition or injury are, so that you can decide how important the test is. Find out what the test involves by asking your doctor or the people who will be performing the test. Do not rely on the stories of friends or acquaintances. Get the facts from a reliable source.

Talk about the reason for the test with the child

If your child is old enough to have some understanding of what is happening, talking about the study with your child before the test should help to reduce his or her anxiety. If a parent or carer who attends the study with a child is anxious, then the child usually notices this and will often also become anxious or frightened. Parents and carers are encouraged to find out about the test and have their own fears allayed before attending with their child.

Use distraction techniques

We are all more relaxed when we are doing a familiar activity and children can be distracted from an unfamiliar environment by having their favourite toy, book, music or movie. Some children are also able to be distracted by talking about their favourite place and or pretending that the part of their body having the test is not part of them during the test. Another technique is to say "if anything bothers you while we are doing the test, you can blow away those feelings (or the bother) by taking deep breaths in and blowing them out. These techniques can work particularly well for injections and blood tests when the child is prepared for the test by a trained therapist.

Plan to have the test performed when it best suits your child's routine

If your child is very young, some tests may be performed just after a feed when they are "content" and sleepy. If a child is grumpy when hungry, make sure that any period of fasting is as short as possible and as close to waking up as possible.

Be honest with your child

If you tell a child that something will not be uncomfortable and it is, he or she will not trust you next time. Use words that acknowledge the discomfort but do not describe the test using phrases only associated with pain and a bad experience.

It is better to describe an injection as a "scratch" rather than a "bee sting". Saying that they should "go floppy" or "relax" or "just lie or sit down" is better than saying it will "hurt if they do not keep still". Children may tense their muscles if asked to keep still so it is often best to avoid this request.

Do not use phrases such as "this will only hurt a little bit", or "the nasty doctor will not hurt much". Children will focus on the word hurt, not hearing or understanding the word that is supposed to minimise the hurt. As far as children are concerned it is all 'hurt' regardless of the size. Children are also less likely to trust a person referred to as nasty.

Make sure the person with the child during the test can be calm and supportive

Children quickly recognise the anxiety or concern of a parent or carer. If the person with the child is very anxious or worried about the test, this may make the child worried and distressed. If you are unable to be calm and supportive, due to normal worry or previous bad experiences, it may be better that you let someone else care for your child during the test.

You can wait outside and be happy to see your child when the test is finished, but do not greet them as though they have survived a horrendous ordeal. If they did not cope well you will reinforce the negative experience; if they did cope well they may think that they should not have, and then lose trust in the people who got them through the test without problems.

Use anaesthetic cream for blood tests and injections

If your child is going to have an injection or blood test, ask if an anaesthetic cream can be used. This numbs the skin slightly and often enables the injection to be performed without discomfort. It takes 45-60 minutes to work so will need to be planned in advance. Talk to the people doing the test to find out if it is something that can be used for your child.

Use of sedation or a general anaesthetic

In some circumstances, no amount of explanation, understanding or comforting will allow your child to have the study performed without significant stress to your child, you and the staff performing the study. In these circumstances it may be better to arrange for sedation or a general anaesthetic to be performed. With sedation, a medicine is given to your child to make them sleepy or fall asleep. Older children may have a medicine that makes the test hard to remember.

If required, a general anaesthetic would be given by an anaesthetist, and it is the same as that given if your child was having an operation. This is usually only undertaken at a specialist children's hospital or imaging practice. You should talk about this with your doctor to consider all the possible options, as sedations and general anaesthetics do have a small but real risk.

Please note:

This information is of a general nature only and is not intended as a substitute for medical advice. It is designed to support, not replace, the relationship that exists between a patient and his/her doctor. It is recommended that any specific questions regarding your procedure be discussed with your family doctor or medical specialist

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