

Information

About Tonsillectomy

For recurrent infections



About Your Condition

What are tonsils?

Tonsils are small glands of lymphoid tissue that sit at the back of your throat. You have two tonsils, one on the left side and one on the right side. Tonsils are part of the body's system for fighting infection and are important when you are a child.

Do I need tonsils?

As you get older the tonsils become less important in fighting germs and usually shrink. Your body can still fight infections without your tonsils.

What is tonsillitis?

Tonsillitis is an infection or inflammation of the of the tonsils.

Why does it occur?

Tonsillitis occurs when you get a viral or bacterial infection in the throat.

How does it affect me?

Tonsillitis causes a fever, sore throat, foul breath, difficulty swallowing, painful swallowing and tender glands in the neck. When your tonsils are swollen this may cause mouth breathing, snoring, and breathing pauses at night. Tonsillitis can make you feel very tired and unwell. These symptoms usually get better after three to four days but can last up to two weeks.

Tonsillitis is very common and most people can be treated with painkillers and rest. Some patients may also need antibiotics.

When you have tonsillitis the tonsils usually look red and swollen, they may have white spots or pus that covers them partially or completely.



Tonsillitis

Sore throats caused by viruses are very common and most people can be treated with painkillers and rest. Patients who suffer from tonsillitis caused by bacterial infections may also need antibiotics.

Sometimes a collection of pus can develop beside the infected tonsil. This is called a quinsy. A quinsy can cause a very severe sore throat, high temperature, difficulty breathing and difficulty opening your mouth.

A quinsy requires drainage usually under local anaesthetic, in addition to pain relief and antibiotics.

About the Operation

Benefits and Alternatives

Why has a tonsillectomy been recommended to me?

You have had the minimum number of episodes of severe tonsillitis or quinsy where the benefit of the operation (preventing further severe episodes) outweigh the common risks (pain, bleeding, infection).

Tonsillectomy is an option if you have had

- Episodes of sore throat that are disabling and stop you functioning normally (e.g stopping you working, caring for someone like a child or elderly person, stop you going to school or education or prevent you doing sport) and either:
 - » 7 or more of these sore throat episodes in the past year
- Or
- » 5 or more such episodes in each of the last 2 years
- Or
- » 3 or more such episodes in each of the last 3 years
- OR
- » 2 or more episodes of quinsy (tonsil abscess) where you have had to have pus drained from your throat in hospital.

The operation to remove the tonsils is called a tonsillectomy. Tonsillectomy is one of the most common operations performed in the UK.

Tonsillectomy is beneficial in the small number of patients who have lots of severe episodes of tonsillitis.

What does the operation involve?

A tonsillectomy is performed under general anaesthetic. (This means you will be asleep). The operation is performed through the mouth, meaning there are no external (outside) cuts or scars. The operation usually takes about 30 to 45 minutes. Unfortunately it is a very painful operation. Tonsillectomy is

usually done as a day case. Some patients may require an overnight stay in hospital.

About the Operation

Benefits and Alternatives

What are the benefits of having the operation?

The benefit of the operation is to **prevent further episodes of bacterial tonsillitis**. You may still get sore throats in the future, but they should occur less often and be less severe.

It is important to remember that a mild, daily sore throat is not caused by an infection of the tonsils and removing your tonsils will not remove this type of daily sore throat.

What are the alternatives to surgery?

We can treat tonsillitis with painkillers and antibiotics. Saline gargles (a mixture of water and table salt) are often helpful to reduce the severity and number of episodes of tonsillitis.

What if I decide not to have surgery?

Tonsillitis can be treated with painkillers and antibiotics. You may not experience further severe episodes or you may continue to experience severe sore throats and infections. Sometimes a severe infection can spread to the space next to the tonsil (peri-tonsillar abscess) and is called a quinsy. Sometimes the infection can spread to the glands in the neck and cause an abscess (collection of pus).

What if I decide not to have any treatment when I get tonsillitis in the future including antibiotics/painkillers?

You will continue to have symptoms. You may develop a complication of infection if the pus spreads to the neck. Sometimes the bacteria can be carried in your blood and affect your heart and joints. This is called **rheumatic fever** and can develop very rarely 2 to 4 weeks after a sore throat. You may develop joint pain, chest pain, breathlessness, tiredness and a sensation that your heart is racing.

What are the risks

What are the risks of tonsillectomy?

Tonsillectomy, like any other operation, has certain risks. The main ones to know about are bleeding and infection.

Bleeding

- Bleeding after surgery can occur at any point in the two weeks after your operation.
- About **1 in every 5 adults** will return to hospital with bleeding and may need admitted to hospital for observation.
- **5 in 100 people will need a second operation** to stop the bleeding. Bleeding can start very quickly.
- Sometimes you may need to be given a blood transfusion if you have lost a lot of blood.

Infection in the throat can occur in the 2 weeks after the operation. Fever within the first 24-48 hours after tonsillectomy is common and can occur in up to half of patients. A fever that quickly goes back to normal should not require antibiotics. If the fever (a high temperature **(38°C/100°F or above)**) does not go down it could indicate an infection

Swelling of the uvula (the dangly bit at the back of your throat) can occur after the operation. This can feel like you have something stuck at the back of the throat. This gets better within a few days.

Damage to teeth, lips and gums.

The instrument we use to keep your mouth open during the operation sits on the teeth. Please let us know if you have any loose, capped or crowned teeth.

Altered taste

You may find that food and drink tastes different after your operation. It usually gets better without any treatment.

General anaesthetic

The operation is performed under general anaesthetic (GA). Complications include blood clots in the legs (deep vein thrombosis) or lungs (pulmonary embolism), heart attack, chest infection, stroke and death. The pre-assessment team and anaesthetist will explain what occurs during a general anaesthetic and the associated risks that are relevant to you. This link summarises the common events and risks:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/general-anaesthesia/>



Tonsillectomy Quick Facts

When will I be discharged?

Surgery is often performed as a day case procedure. Most patients are fit to go home a few hours after they recover from the general anaesthetic. The minimum recovery time before discharge after the operation is 6 hours. If you have any conditions that increase the risk of bleeding you may have to stay overnight.

What should I expect after surgery?

Pain

Moderate to severe pain is expected after tonsillectomy. Pain can either be on one side of the throat or both sides of the throat. Over half of patients also experience pain in their ears. Pain tends to increase for the first 5-7 days after the operation.

It is very important that you take your painkillers on a regular basis for the first few days after your operation.

Halitosis (bad breath)

Bad breath is very common after tonsillectomy. Bad breath alone does not mean you have an infection. Drinking plenty of water and chewing gum may help.

What does my throat look like after the operation?

After your operation the back of your throat will get a white coating, like the picture below. This is part of the healing process and is completely normal. It is not pus and you do not need antibiotics.

You may have sutures (stitches) or ties at the back of your throat after the operation. This will look like black thread in your throat. The sutures usually dissolve away after two weeks.

Can I eat and drink as normal after tonsillectomy?

Yes. Eating and drinking as normally as possible reduces the chance of getting an infection or bleeding after your tonsils are removed.



Normal appearance of the throat after tonsillectomy

Nausea

You may feel sick after your operation but you can get anti-sickness medication to help if required.

How long will I be off work?

It is recommended that you take 14 days off work. When your throat is healing you are more vulnerable to picking up an infection therefore during this 14-day period you should avoid large groups of people, people with colds, coughs and smoky or dusty environments.

Can I exercise?

It is advised that you do not do any strenuous exercise for two weeks to allow the throat to heal.

Can I fly?

It is recommended that you do not fly for 14 days after your operation.

Can I brush my teeth?

Yes. It is important to brush your teeth after your operation as this will help keep your mouth clean. Avoid mouthwashes which contain alcohol as it will sting the back of your throat.

Can I smoke?

Avoid smoky atmospheres, because cigarette smoke will irritate the throat while healing. We advise not smoking before and after your surgery.

Will I need to be seen in the clinic after my operation?

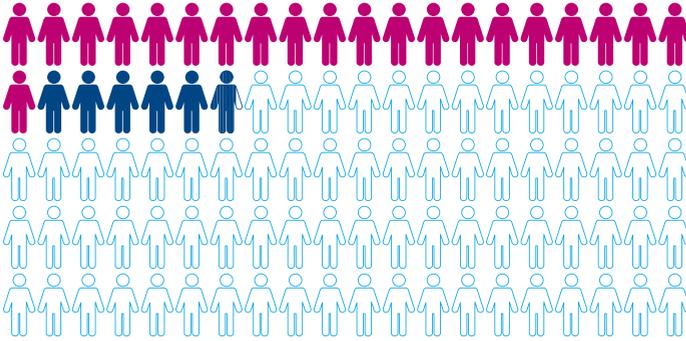
We don't routinely see patients in clinic after their tonsillectomy. However, there are some patient's that may need a follow up appointment and we will tell you if you need an appointment.

What will happen next?

We do not routinely make an appointment for you. If, after reading the information within this leaflet you would like to discuss having a tonsillectomy please call the number on the covering letter.

Understanding the Risks of surgery

Tonsillectomy is an option, which can reduce your symptoms, but as with any surgery there are risks involved. It is important that you understand the possible risks when making your decision.



Re-admission to hospital

21% of people are re-admitted to hospital because of complications

Further surgery

5.8% require further surgery after the original Tonsillectomy

of the 21% of people re-admitted to Hospital:

Bleeding



20.4% have bleeding after surgery that requires re-admission to Hospital

Pain



2.4% of people are re-admitted to hospital because of very severe pain

Blood Transfusion



0.8% requiring a blood transfusion after surgery

Other rare complications include: dental/teeth complications, swelling of throat tissue, vomiting, temporary altered taste sensation.

This infographic has been adapted with kind permission from NHS Grampian.

Things to think about when deciding if surgery is the right option for you:

	Non-surgical management (eg: painkillers, antibiotics)	Surgery (eg: Tonsillectomy)
Inconvenience	You may continue to need to take days off work and require GP appointments.	On average you will need to take 2 weeks off work after surgery, but recovery time varies.
Pain	Recurrent pain with tonsillitis. Possibly worse if tonsil abscess develops.	Severe pain, usually lasts 7–10 days.
Short-term Risks	Possible mild side-effects from antibiotics (tummy upset or diarrhoea 1 in 10 people; mild allergic reaction eg: cough or rash 1 in 15 people). Serious allergic reactions are rare.	See above for surgery risk. General anaesthetic eg: nausea, vomiting.
Long-term Risks	Regular use of antibiotics may cause you to become allergic to them and are known to be a bad idea. Approx. 1 in 100 people may develop a tonsil abscess (quinsy).	Scarring in the throat
Long-term Outcome	Tonsillitis can settle spontaneously.	Reduction in episodes of tonsillitis (you can still get throat infections).

What's important to you?

Use the questions below to think about what matters to you most when making the decision to have surgery.

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
I do not want a treatment that has a risk of complications	<input type="checkbox"/>				
The most important thing for me is to have less sore throats	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I am willing to wait and see if my symptoms get better	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I have concerns about having an operation and a general anaesthetic	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Tonsillitis has stopped me doing things at home and at work	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I want a treatment that means I do not have to take time off work	<input type="checkbox"/>				

This infographic has been adapted with kind permission from NHS Grampian.

