Tonsillectomy and My Child

Throat infections are very common in children. In fact, most kids average over 1 or 2 sore throats per year. Although most infections are caused by a virus and resolve on their own, some will require treatment by your doctor with medicines or antibiotics. If severe, at some point your pediatrician may want to discuss tonsillectomy (a surgery to remove tonsils). But how do you know when the time is right to consider this surgery for your child? Fortunately, there are some clear guidelines to help you start a conversation with your doctor on tonsillectomy.

Tonsillectomy is one of the most frequently performed childhood surgeries. For some children, tonsillectomy can greatly improve their quality of life. However, evidence shows tonsillectomy may be no better than taking a wait-and-see approach for children who only have a few infections per year. Your child may benefit from surgery if he or she is missing an excessive amount of school because of repeated throat infections or has trouble sleeping because of enlarged tonsils that may block his or her airway. Often even without surgery, the natural history of infections occurs less often as your child gets older.

All surgeries have associated risks and tonsillectomy is no exception. Please discuss these with your physician. The American Academy of Otolaryngology, Head & Neck Surgery advocates surgery for only severe cases of recurring tonsil infections. The Academy recommends that surgery be considered if the child has at least 7 episodes of throat infection in a single year, or 5 episodes per year for 2 years, or 3 episodes per year for 3 years. Evidence shows children not meeting these criteria who had tonsillectomy, generally did not benefit from the surgery compared to those who did not have surgery. *

Before tonsillectomy surgery, parents are encouraged to discuss these criteria with their pediatrician or specialist and to ask about the risks and expected benefits.

* Source: American Academy of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery Clinical Practice Guideline entitled; “Tonsillectomy in Children”