

What are tonsils?

Tonsils are small glands in the throat, one on each side. They are there to fight germs when you are a young child. As you get older, the tonsils become less important in fighting germs and usually shrink.

Do you need them?

Your body can still fight germs without them. We only take them out if they are doing more harm than good.

Why take them out?

We will only take tonsils out if they cause recurrent sore throats despite treatment with antibiotics. The other main reason for removing tonsils is if they are large and block the airway. A quinsy is an abscess that develops alongside the tonsil, as a result of tonsil infection, and is most unpleasant. People who have had quinsy therefore often choose to have a tonsillectomy to prevent having another. Tonsils are also removed if we suspect there is a tumour in the tonsil. A rapid increase in the size of a tonsil or ulceration or bleeding occurs if a tumour of the tonsil develops. Tumours of the tonsil are rare.



The removal of enlarged tonsils like this can relieve airway obstruction.

Do I have to have my tonsils out?

You will not always need to have your tonsils out. You may want to just wait and see if the tonsil problem gets better by itself. The doctor will explain to you why he or she feels that surgery is the best treatment. You may change your mind about the operation at any time, and signing a consent form does not mean that you have to have the operation. If you would like to have a second opinion about the treatment, you can ask your specialist. He or she will not mind arranging this for you. You may wish to ask your own GP to arrange a second opinion with another specialist.

Before your operation

Arrange for two weeks off work. Let us know if you have a chest infection or tonsillitis before your admission date because it may be better to postpone the operation. It is very important to tell us if you have any unusual bleeding or bruising problems, or if this type of problem might run in your family.

How is the operation done?

You will be asleep under general anaesthetic. We take the tonsils out through the mouth, and then stop the bleeding. This takes about 30 minutes.

How long will I be in hospital?

In most hospitals, surgeons prefer tonsillectomy patients to stay in hospital for one night. In some hospitals tonsil surgery is done as a day case, if your home is close to the hospital. Either way, your surgeon will only let you go home when you are eating and drinking and feel well enough.

Possible complications

Tonsil surgery is very safe, but every operation has a small risk. The most serious problem is bleeding. This may need a second operation to stop it. As many as five adults out of every 100 who have their tonsils out will need to be taken back into hospital because of bleeding, but only one adult out of every 100 will need a second operation.

During the operation, there is a very small chance that we may chip or knock out a tooth, especially if it is loose, capped or crowned. Please let us know if you have any teeth like this.

Some patients notice a change in how food and drink tastes after the operation.

Your throat will be sore

Your throat will be sore for approximately ten days. It is important to take painkillers regularly, half an hour before meals for at least the first week. Do not take aspirin because it may make you bleed.

Eat normal food

Eating food will help your throat to heal. It will help the pain too. Drink plenty of fluids and stick to bland, non-spicy food. Chewing gum may also help the pain.

You may have sore ears

This is normal. It happens because your throat and ears have the same nerves. It does not mean that you have an ear infection.

Your throat will look white

This is normal while your throat heals. You may also see small threads in your throat – they are used to help stop the bleeding during the operation, and they will fall out by themselves.

Some people get a throat infection after surgery, usually if they have not been eating properly. If this happens you may notice a fever and a bad smell from your throat. Call your GP or the hospital for advice if this happens.

You will need 10 to 14 days off work

Make sure you rest at home away from crowds and smoky places. Keep away from people with coughs and colds and practice good hand-hygiene to avoid catching a cold. You may feel tired for the first few days, but this is normal, and you should ensure you rest.

Bleeding can be serious

If you notice any bleeding from your throat, you must see a doctor. Call your GP, call the ward, or go to your nearest hospital casualty department.

If you have any problems or questions, please contact:

Please insert local department routine and emergency contact details here

Disclaimer: This publication is designed for the information of patients. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the information contained may not be comprehensive and patients should not act upon it without seeking professional advice.

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ABOUT ADULT TONSIL SURGERY

By Matthew Yung

ENT-UK is the professional Association for British Ear, Nose and Throat Surgeons and related professionals. This leaflet provides some background information about tonsil surgery in adults. It may be helpful in the discussions you have with your GP or specialist when deciding on possible treatment. This information leaflet is to support and not to substitute the discussion between you and your doctor. Before you give your consent to the treatment, you should raise any concerns with your GP or specialist.



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