

# Helping your teen cope with scoliosis surgery

Reviewed by SickKids Staff | Last updated: June 01, 2008

Having scoliosis surgery can be a very emotionally difficult experience for a teenager. Learn about common stressors as well as how to cope with them.

## Key points

- Encourage your teen to take on responsibility gradually in making decisions about their health and treatment.
- It is important to be supportive and maintain a dialogue with your teen, even if they are angry at needing surgery as this behaviour is generally based on fear.
- During the first few days after surgery, your teen may display mood swings or behaviour that is not typical for them due to pain or the influence of medications.

It can be emotional for your teens to find out they need surgery. Your teen will need your support during their time in the hospital and when they are ready to go home.

## During the decision-making process

Encourage your teen to take on responsibility gradually in making decisions related to their health and treatment. These may be decisions about appointments and tests. They also need to participate in making the final decision about whether to have surgery, and if they have been involved before in decisions, they will be more prepared.

Your teen may be very angry when they find out they need surgery. They may think, "Why me?" They may lash out at family members or friends. It is very important to be supportive and maintain a dialogue with your teen. Remember that their behaviour is generally based on fear. Talk openly and honestly with your teen about their health and treatment. Exchange ideas, listen, and validate their thoughts and concerns.

As parents, considering whether or not your teen should have surgery can be stressful, and a difficult decision. You may have a different opinion than your spouse/partner or your teen's other biological parent. If you still feel very different in your opinions after discussion together, it might be helpful to ask to meet together with the surgeon and/or advanced practice nurse to ask more questions and talk further about your concerns. It is always beneficial to have your questions ready, so write them down as you think of them and bring

them with you to talk to your health care team. You and your spouse may have opposing views but your teen should feel that whatever decision is made, both parents will support them in it. It's OK to discuss your individual questions with your teen.

Understand that your teen may have different reasons for wanting or not wanting to have surgery. They may have different concerns about the surgery. All of your teen's concerns are valid and should be taken seriously. Don't disregard them.

## During the hospital stay

On the day of the surgery, it's extremely important to be emotionally present for your teen. They need you. Be calm, supportive, and strong. Many teens feel extremely frightened when leaving their parents to walk to the operating room but feel they can't express this fear. They are afraid to cry or show other raw emotion to their parents because they don't want to burden them with it.

During the first couple of days after surgery, your teen will be in pain, nauseated, groggy, and disoriented. They will be sensitive to sound, light, and smells. This can cause mood swings or behaviour that is not typical for your teen. Be prepared to accept this. They aren't really in control of their emotions when they are in pain or under the influence of medications. Try to remain patient and supportive. If your teen is having trouble coping at this time and you think certain behaviours are interfering with their recovery or your ability to support them, you can gently identify the unhelpful behaviour, acknowledge your teen's stress, fear and frustration, and then help them find more appropriate ways of expressing themselves.

Having surgery and recovering from it can be stressful. It can impact on your son or daughter physically, psychologically, and socially. Encourage your teen to speak up and ask questions. Help them to take an active, positive role while in hospital. Understand that they will need extra physical and emotional support.

## Going home

Your teen may be fearful of leaving the hospital where they received intensive care. Be supportive and let your teen know that you and they have been prepared by staff to be ready to go home, and you and your teen will do well at home.

Your teen might want more tangible and emotional support from you than they did before surgery. This might be a dramatic shift. Remember that this change might be hard or difficult to adjust to for BOTH of you. At a time in childhood development when teens become more independent from their parents, your teen may be unhappy about their need to return to dependency. Accept this ambivalence in your teen, and reassure them that this dependency is only temporary, and that you admire and accept their natural growing independence, which they will resume after they have recovered from their surgery.

Encourage your teen to listen to their body and not over-do it. It will take time and patience to

recover. Understand that they will want to get back to their activities at some point. They will want to see their friends, get out of the house, and get back to normal. Encourage them when it happens.

At each of these phases, remember that your team of health care professionals is there for you. It is not unusual for teens and families to feel overwhelmed. Needing professional support does not mean you are not coping.

Please visit [AboutKidsHealth.ca](https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca) for more child health information.

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