

# Going to the Hospital

## Preparing Your Child for a Trip to the Hospital

- Just as with any new experience, it's helpful to talk with your child about what to expect. Preparing children can help to decrease their fear and anxiety. You may want to sing the strategy song from *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, "When we do something new, let's talk about what we'll do."
- It can be helpful to gather as much information from your doctor and the hospital staff so that you understand what will happen and how involved you can be. Once you have that information, you can decide what details to share with your child.
- For children, having a loved one nearby when they are in the hospital can lessen nervousness and increase their feelings of security. Try to be at the hospital for your child as much as you can or, if possible, make plans to have a family member with your child at the hospital.



- When should you prepare your child for their visit to the hospital? Since infants and toddlers do not understand time, it's best to tell them the day before they are going to the hospital. Preschool aged children will need more time to process the information that you are sharing with them. Preschoolers also need time to ask questions. You are the expert on your child, so you should decide the best timing. Some medical professionals suggest a timeframe of a few days to a week. Some parents use their child's age as a guide for when to tell them about the hospital visit. For example, three days before for a 3-year-old, four days before for a 4-year-old, etc.

- Choose a quiet time to talk with your child about their upcoming visit to the hospital and remember to use a positive, calm tone of voice. Keep your explanation simple. Often, preschoolers' imaginative thinking can lead them to have misconceptions about some medical procedures, so use words that your child will understand, and be honest. Don't say that something won't hurt if it will or may hurt. Children trust us more and more each time they learn that the things we tell them are true.



- Listen closely to what your child says or asks. Children may ask one question in the moment and take several minutes before asking the next one. Answer one question at a time. If you don't know the answer to a question, you might say something like, "I'm not sure about that. We can ask the doctor and nurses when we see them."
- Talk about experiences that your child will see and hear in the hospital, like bright lights, noisy machines, and new smells. Young children understand their world through what they can see, hear, smell, and touch, so you can leave out other details. "First/Then" statements can be useful to prepare your child for the sequence of events that will take place at the hospital. You and your child might find it helpful to watch the episode of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, "Daniel Goes to the Hospital," at [pbskids.org/daniel](https://pbskids.org/daniel). Families can also use the "[Daniel Tiger Goes to the Hospital](#)" family activity pages that include pictures, text, and questions to help families prepare for a child's time at the hospital.



- It's normal and understandable for parents to be nervous when their child is going to the hospital. However, it's important to try to keep your own fears in check and try to keep them hidden from your child. When your child sees that you are coping well, they will likely feel more reassured that everything will be okay.



- Some adults may have mixed feelings about their own past experiences with hospitals or medical challenges. It is important to remember to be calm and confident and remind your child that doctors and nurses will be there to help.
- If the hospital policy allows, encourage your child to bring one of their favorite toys or blankets. Bringing a special item can offer comfort and help children feel secure when they are nervous.

- Young children learn best through play before, during, and after their hospital experience. Once you've told your child about the upcoming event, make pretend play materials easily available so they can use them as they choose. Pretend play always offers a child a way to master their concerns. Children can use everyday materials around the house for pretend play. Some children might also enjoy playing the Doctor Daniel online game.
- Remind your child frequently that you, the doctors, and nurses are there to make them feel better or to fix a part of their body.
- Get support for yourself. If possible, bring someone to the hospital who can help you during the whole process.
- Prepare in advance for when you return home. You may want to organize plans for groceries and meals, prescriptions and supplies, or follow-up medical appointments.