



Talking About Healthy Lifestyles with Kids (TALK-PG):

A guide for parents having bariatric surgery



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER



Bariatric surgery is life-changing, even lifesaving. Your family is part of your journey, and they'll see the changes taking place with your body and lifestyle. It's important to talk with your family, especially your children, about your surgery and the healthy changes you can make together.

As you start your bariatric surgery process, this guide will help you talk with your child or teenager about:

- the reasons you're having bariatric surgery
- what you expect for your recovery and the changes after surgery
- making healthy changes at home that involve the whole family
- possible problems that could come up and how to deal with them together



We hope that you can use this guide to talk with your child about your process through surgery, to answer their questions and to start planning a healthier lifestyle together.

If you need more support to be able to talk about these things with your child or have any concerns you want to discuss, please reach out to find a time to talk with one of our behavioral health providers at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center Comprehensive Weight Management Program:

614-366-6675

wexnermedical.osu.edu/bariatricinfo

This guide was developed by Keeley Pratt, PhD, IMFT-S, with the support of The Ohio State University College of Education and Human Ecology and Wexner Medical Center Department of Surgery.

© 2021 The Ohio State University



Part 1. Talking to your child about bariatric surgery

Why do it?

After having surgery, your body is going to change very quickly as you lose weight. You'll also make changes to the amount of food and liquids you eat and drink after surgery.

These changes can confuse or worry children who don't understand what's happening to their parent. Even though your child sees the changes happening to your body and what you're eating, they likely don't understand what's happening to you if you don't explain it.

Having open and honest talks with your child at the right time can help them understand why you decided to have surgery, what the benefits are and what they can expect with your recovery.

Where and how to do it?

Talk with your child in a place where they feel comfortable. Try to include everyone who lives in the home with your child (such as siblings, co-parents, grandparents or others). By including everyone who lives with you, you'll be able to share your perspective about having surgery, instead of others sharing it who may not get across what you want to share.



Engage in open communication with them about your surgery, and be flexible about answering their questions as they come up. Try not to react strongly to their comments or questions. This can cause them to shut down and prevent them from talking with you.

Remember to talk in a way that your child or teen will understand based on their age. For younger children, it's best to keep your message simple. Use examples they're familiar with. Teens may want more details about your surgery and recovery.

It's also important to talk about the surgery as a way to improve your health. Help your child understand the plans for your surgery, hospital stay and recovery. Talking with your child about your plans will help them to worry less and be less confused about your upcoming surgery.

What to include?

Here are a few topics that are important for you to talk about with your child about your surgery:

- **Why you're having surgery**

Try to focus on your health as the reason for having surgery. It's likely that your child or teen has heard you or other people close to them talk negatively about larger bodies, and have seen family members trying to lose weight. It's important that your reason for the surgery doesn't cause your child to feel badly about their own body, self-esteem or body image. It's important that you're honest with your child. Highlight your health and quality of life, instead of your appearance, as the reason for having surgery.

For a school-age child, you could say, *"Having surgery on my stomach will help me be more active and play with you more."*

For your teen, you could say, *"You've seen me try to be healthy before by being active and eating healthy foods. This surgery will help me more easily make those healthy choices."*

- **Details about your surgery and recovery**

You should allow enough time to talk with your child to prepare them — about a few weeks to a month before surgery. You may want to take them through what they may see you doing before surgery, such as being on a special diet, and the reasons for them.

Talk with them about your plan for the day of surgery, including who'll be with you for the surgery, and who'll take care of them while you're gone.

Talk with them about how long you'll be gone (one to two days) and how they can contact you while you're in the hospital. This includes if they're allowed to visit you or if you'd like them to visit you while you're still in the hospital.

For example, *"I'm going to have surgery on my stomach so I can be more active and healthy. Mom is going to be in the hospital with me when I have surgery. I'll be gone two days. Your grandmother will be staying with you at home and can help you with your schoolwork and take you to practice. While I'm gone, you can call me on mom's cellphone when she's with me, and even visit me once while I'm in the hospital after the surgery."*



When you return home, let your child know what will be different about you. It's likely that you'll feel tired, weak and sore after surgery. Let your child know that your body needs to heal and recover. Part of that healing is eating and drinking smaller amounts and different types of food (such as soft foods) while your stomach heals. Explain that you'll be able to eat regular foods again after your stomach heals, but the portion sizes may be smaller than what you ate before. This is because you're eating healthier, more-filling foods, and drinking more water.

For example, *“When I come home from surgery, I'll have to eat more slowly, eat softer foods and make sure I drink enough water. As my stomach feels better, I'll start to eat normal foods again. I'll be eating less, but I'll be eating healthier foods that make me feel good and give me lots of energy.”*

- **Changes to your body and lifestyle**

After your surgery, you'll lose weight quickly. It's important that you talk about the changes happening to your body in terms of your overall health. Instead of focusing on your weight loss, talk with your child about feeling better, having more energy and the healthy changes you're making. By talking about how you feel and what you're doing, you'll be focusing on the health effects of the surgery, rather than on your weight loss. This helps your children to focus on their feelings and behaviors around a healthy lifestyle, instead of their own weight and body image.

For example, *“It's been a couple months since I had surgery and I feel like I have a lot more energy. Now I can even walk a mile with you and your sister every day!”*



Children and teens often show emotions in ways other than talking.

Your child may react to the things they're hearing in ways that they aren't able to say. For example, you may notice that they look confused or scared, but aren't saying it. Try to watch the way your child is reacting to the information you're sharing. Ask questions if their face or body language shows concern or other emotions they're not saying.

For example, you could say, *“It looks like you're concerned about what I just shared. Let's talk a little more about it. I would love to hear more about what might worry you or what questions you have.”*

Keeping the conversation going...

Make sure to keep the conversation going by checking in with your child as you progress through surgery and recovery. As you move from surgery to recovery and adjust to a healthier lifestyle, new questions may come up. Encourage your child to talk about any concerns or fears they have. Tell them that their concerns are always OK and to talk about them. That's why it will be important to talk with your child about the changes to your body and your lifestyle along the way.

The next section will discuss how you and your child can work toward a healthier lifestyle together and the healthy changes that you can make to your home.



Part 2. Modeling healthy behaviors for your child and making healthy changes at home

As you go through your journey, you have an opportunity to set an example for your child to support healthy habits that your family can engage in together. After you heal from surgery, modeling healthy eating, physical activity and healthy habits can help your child adopt new healthy behaviors that they can continue throughout their lives.

After you recover from surgery, you'll be able to eat a variety of healthy foods again and be more physically active. We know that children are more likely to choose healthy foods if their parent also eats those same foods. They're also more likely to be active if their parents are also active.

You have an opportunity to serve as a role model for your child as you adopt healthy habits to maintain a healthy lifestyle post-surgery. Engaging your child helps them build the confidence to develop new healthy habits they can carry into adulthood.

Here are some examples of how you can model health habits to your child and make healthy changes to your home:

Healthy eating

- Try new types of foods and meals with your child.
Pick out a couple of new foods or meals each week to prepare and eat together.
- Eat five or more servings of fruits/vegetables each day.
While you're recovering, try new smoothie recipes with pureed fruits and vegetables.

- Drink lots of water.
Try adding lemon or lime juice to water for extra flavor.
- Avoid sugar-sweetened drinks (such as soda and sports drinks).
Try low- or reduced-calorie supplements to add to your water.
- Practice using healthy portion sizes.
Help your child understand healthy portion sizes. As you recover, explain how your portion sizes will start very small and become close to normal size later.
- Eat healthy foods as a snack.
Try different snacks that combine protein and fiber to benefit your recovery and your child's healthy diet.

Physical activity and exercise

- Think of a fun physical activity that you can do with your child, like playing active games together.
- Try to be active for at least one hour each day. You can break this up into different parts (like 20 or 40 minutes at a time).
- Try to think of easy ways to add activity into everyday routines, like walking or riding bikes short distances, instead of driving.

Family routines

- Set the same times for meals and snacks.
- Try to eat at least one meal each day as a family (such as dinner), when you can have a positive conversation with each other.



- Don't eat in front of the television, computer or any screens.
- Try to set rules and limits for your child's screen time. Aim for less than two hours each day.
- Try to have all family members eat the same foods, rather than each family member eating different things.
- Try to use family meals and activities as a time to learn more about your child, spending positive, quality time with them.

Talking about healthy habits

- Don't punish your child if they don't eat everything on their plate.
- Don't use food as a reward. Try not to talk negatively about eating healthy foods or being active. **For example, "You have to eat these vegetables, or no dessert."** *"Let's get this walk over with."*
- Praise your child for making healthy food choices or for being active.

Ask your child questions about healthy foods and physical activity to help them think about them more. **For example, "How did you feel after going for that walk? Do you have more energy?"**

"What did you think of eating that new vegetable? What kind of taste can you compare it to?"

"What's gotten easier about walking since we started doing this together a couple months ago?"

We hope that your bariatric surgery can serve as a starting point for your entire family to engage in a healthy lifestyle together. You can be a positive role model for your child in adopting healthier behaviors that they can carry with them for years to come.

There may be times when your child may begin to develop behaviors that concern you. The next section will help you identify concerning signs to look for related to challenges around healthy eating and physical activity.



Part 3. Identifying and preventing negative effects on your child

The changes you'll go through after surgery, like rapid weight loss, are natural effects of the surgery. You'll also be making changes to improve your health behaviors as you recover, like eating small portion sizes and healthier foods. Even though these are normal and healthy changes after surgery, your child may not understand. If your child already suffers from low self-

esteem or negative body image, these changes may trigger or make unhealthy eating habits worse. These may include overeating, not eating enough or other problems. These are called disordered eating behaviors. If left untreated, they can lead to eating disorders or obesity, and other problems (like anxiety or depression) that can affect your child's quality of life.

What is disordered eating? Disordered eating describes behavior that is unhealthy, but may not be considered an eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating. They can cause harm and turn into more severe symptoms that put your child at risk for long-term health problems. Disordered eating behaviors can be hard to identify because they often have less obvious and less severe symptoms than eating disorders. These behaviors (like exercising a lot or being very rigid with food choices) may even be praised by people outside of the family, which can help reinforce and encourage them. Later, they can become a problem and potentially dangerous to your child.





Watch for these signs in your child

- Fast weight changes up or down
- Preoccupied with food, weight or body image
- Rigid rules and routines around eating and exercise
- Diets or skips meals
- Anxiety around eating certain foods
- Worries a lot about weight and shape
- Shame around eating and exercise
- Avoids social situations involving food and eating
- Obsessive with exercise
- Eats in secret, or hides or hoards food
- Feelings of losing control around food, overeating or bingeing
- Uses exercise or limits food intake to make up for unhealthy choices
- Makes themselves vomit, or uses laxatives, diuretics or diet pills



What do I do if I see one or more of these signs in my child?

If your child has shown any of these signs, it's important to show your concern and support. Express your concern to your child in a way that shows you care about their health and happiness. Give details about what you've noticed and why you're concerned, and let them know that you'd like to talk more about this.

For example, *"I noticed that you're not packing a lunch to take to school anymore. I'm worried that you may not be getting enough food to give you the energy you need to participate in your classes and soccer practice. I'd like it if we could talk more about this together."*

Discuss the things you're concerned about, watch how open and honest they are about it and create an action plan together. By identifying the signs early, your child may be more open to working with you. You may be able to support your child in adopting a healthier and more balanced outlook on their eating and physical activity.

You may also need professional support with this process. You can contact us (614-366-6675) and make an appointment with one of our behavioral health providers. You can also find more information and resources on the next page, including the National Eating Disorders Association Helpline.





More information is available from:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
cdc.gov/healthyweight/children
2. U.S. Department of Agriculture MyPlate
myplate.gov/life-stages/kids
3. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Eatright
eatright.org/health/diseases-and-conditions/eating-disorders/what-is-disordered-eating
4. National Eating Disorders Association
nationaleatingdisorders.org
5. National Eating Disorders Association Helpline
nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/contact-helpline



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER COMPREHENSIVE WEIGHT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Martha Morehouse Outpatient Care
Concourse Suite 1222
2050 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43221

For questions or more information about surgical weight loss,
please call 614-366-6675 or visit wexnermedical.osu.edu/bariatrics.



About The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center

The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center is central Ohio's only academic medical center. Working as a team, we use the latest discoveries in research, education and patient care to improve people's lives. All of our efforts are focused on personalizing care to meet your specific needs.

The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center is nationally recognized and offers the most advanced care. We are consistently named one of "America's Best Hospitals" by *U.S. News & World Report*. The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center clinicians consult as a team to provide you with personalized care that focuses on advanced treatment options and highly specialized physician experts who evaluate, diagnose, treat and provide follow-up care in an all-inclusive setting.

