

# **General Tonsillectomy Information**

## **An e-book**



## Key Points

The tonsils are a collection of cells in the back of the throat that fight infection.

When there is inflammation of the tonsils, this is called tonsillitis. It usually happens because of an infection.

Tonsillitis often feels like a sore throat and a general feeling of being unwell.

A tonsillectomy removes the tonsils and is typically done for one or two reasons: to stop recurring infections of the tonsils, and/or to improve breathing and sleep.

It is often done at the same time as an adenoidectomy (a similar procedure).

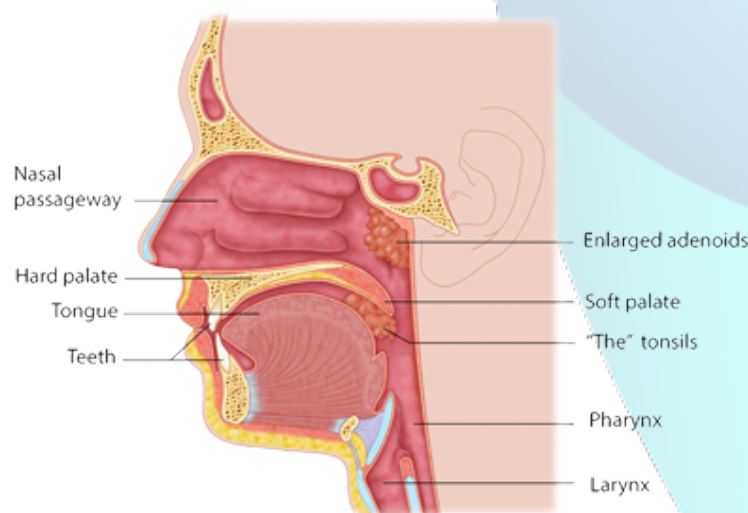
As with any surgery, there are some risks involved. Your surgeon should be able to give you the information you need to make an informed decision.

## What are tonsils?

The tonsils are a collection of cells and immune tissue at the back of your throat that are responsible for fighting infection. They detect and fight bacteria, viruses, and other organisms in the mouth and throat. The tonsils typically shrink as a child becomes an adult.

## What are the adenoids?

When researching tonsillectomy, you'll often hear about the adenoids. The adenoids are similar to the tonsils. They are also a collection of cells that are responsible for fighting infection. However, they sit higher than the tonsils and are at the back of the nose. See the image below for more detail.



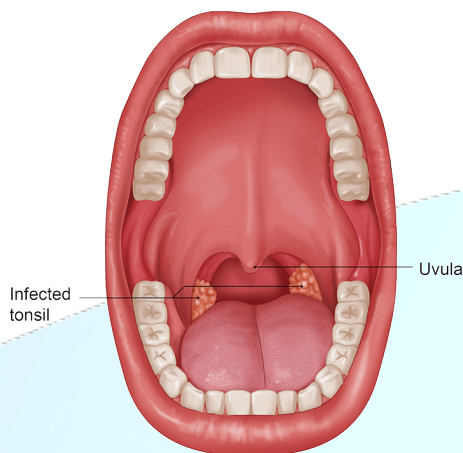
The above image is a side view illustration of the mouth, throat, and associated structures.

Of note, there is tonsillar tissue throughout the mouth and throat, but only one location that people typically refer to as "the" tonsils.

## What problems can tonsils cause?

**Tonsillitis:** Although tonsils are supposed to fight infection, sometimes, they can actually become infected.

Inflammation of the tonsils is called tonsillitis, and it's usually caused by an infection. If the tonsils are infected, often the adenoids are as well.



The image above shows the uvula and two infected tonsils

Some signs and symptoms of tonsillitis include:

- Sore throat
- Difficulty swallowing
- Fever
- Bad breath
- Swollen neck glands
- Feeling generally unwell and tired
- Tonsils may be red and swollen
- Yellow, green, or white pus may be present on tonsils

Almost everyone gets tonsillitis at some point in their life. However, when it's happening repeatedly and impacting quality of life, it might be time to consider surgery.

**Trouble Sleeping:** If the tonsils are too large and get in the way, they can cause problems with sleeping & breathing at night. This is a very important problem to address, especially for children!

Some signs and symptoms that your child may have trouble breathing while asleep include:

- Snoring (often loudly)
- Breathing that stops or pauses during sleep
- Loud snorting during sleep
- Gasping for air during sleep
- Sleeping with an open mouth and/or head tilted back

Sometimes there can also be daytime symptoms in children. This can include: poor concentration, behaviour concerns, irritability, headaches, and less commonly, general tiredness during the day.

Your child may have a home oximetry or sleep study done to see if their breathing or sleep is being impacted. This is an overnight study that measures the amount of oxygen in the blood during sleep and their breathing efforts at night.

It's important to know that when enlarged tonsils & adenoids start to impact sleep and cause snoring and sleep apnoea, it is a significant health problem. For example, sleep apnoea has been shown to cause high blood pressure, shorten life expectancy, cause learning and behavioural disorders, and cause other diseases. If you think you or your child's sleep is being impacted you should contact a registered healthcare provider.

**Other problems tonsils can cause:** Tonsil stones, bad breath, tonsil abscesses, and tonsil cancer.

## What is a tonsillectomy?

The goal of surgery is to remove the tonsils, and thus the problems they cause.

When the tonsils are removed the immune system is still able to work properly. In fact, many people have an improved immune system when diseased tonsils are removed.

It is performed through the mouth and there are no cuts on the surface. The patient will have a general anaesthetic. This means that they are completely asleep and unaware. Usually they will need to stay overnight for this surgery.

As with any surgery there are risks involved, these need to be discussed with the surgeon and healthcare team.

## What are the benefits of a tonsillectomy?

The tonsils will be removed. So, if the tonsils were causing recurrent bouts of tonsillitis, those bouts will no longer occur. If the tonsils were interrupting breathing and sleep, then those symptoms will be resolved or markedly improved in most cases.

After healing is complete (which often takes about 1 to 2 weeks) most patients find their symptoms are greatly improved.

It is important to know that after a tonsillectomy you can still get the typical sore throat that happens with the common cold, although this is usually far milder than tonsillitis. A tonsillectomy only prevents the sore throat that comes from tonsillitis.

## What is an adenoidectomy?

The adenoids can cause similar problems to the tonsils. An adenoidectomy is a procedure where just the adenoids are removed. The adenoids are also removed through the mouth.

## What is an adenotonsillectomy?

This is a surgery where both the adenoids and tonsils are removed during the same procedure.

## What are the different tonsillectomy techniques? What are the important differences?

### Cold Steel

- **What is it?** It involves non-powered instruments (e.g. instruments made of steel that don't produce heat).
- It's been around the longest of any of these techniques.
- **Pros:** No heat energy is transferred to the tissues, there is often less pain, and there's a lower delayed bleeding rate (delayed bleeding

rate refers to bleeding that occurs days to weeks after surgery).

- **Cons:** It takes more time to perform and there's a higher initial bleed rate (initial bleed rate refers to bleeding that happens during or right after surgery).

### Diathermy Tonsillectomy

- **What is it?** Hot electric instruments use electricity to cauterise the tissue between the tonsils and throat. This is to remove the tonsils and seal blood vessels.
- **Pros:** Widely available, fast (less asleep time for the patient), and a lower initial bleeding rate.
- **Cons:** Slightly higher delayed bleeding rate, energy transfer to tissues during the procedure can cause more pain after surgery, and there's a slightly higher risk of scarring.

### Coblation®

- **What is it?** A radio-frequency instrument that creates a local plasma field to coagulate tissue between tonsil and the throat to remove the tonsils and seal blood vessels. No electricity is passed through the tissues.
- **Pros:** There's less heat energy transfer to the tissue and therefore less post-op pain, and also less risk of scarring.
- **Cons:** It takes slightly longer than some other techniques and it's usually slightly more expensive.

### ENT-ceps®

- **What is it?** A very fine hot-wire forceps is used to cut the tissue between the tonsil and throat to remove the tonsils. No electricity is passed through tissues.
- **Pros:** There's minimal heat energy transfer to the tissue and therefore less post-op pain, and also less risk of scarring. It's also very precise.
- **Cons:** Slightly slower procedure and therefore more time asleep. For most surgeons, it takes longer to learn this procedure.



### Bizact®

- **What is it?** A newer procedure that may prove to be more effective and safe than some previous techniques. Uses bipolar electrical energy that passes through only the tissue between the forceps.
- **Pros:** There is no electrical energy transmitted to surrounding tissues so less tissue damage. There's less initial bleeding, and possibly less pain than other procedures.
- **Cons:** Not yet available.

Choosing the technique that is best for you depends on your preferences, your surgeon's recommendations, and the availability of the particular device. No one technique is perfect and there are advantages and disadvantages to each.

### Do I need surgery?

You will need to see a registered healthcare professional to know if surgery is the best option for you.

Your doctor or surgeon may sometimes offer long-term low dose antibiotics before resorting to surgery. Antibiotics can be used when the infection is caused by bacteria and not viruses. This is because antibiotics only work on bacteria.

Surgery is often considered if:

- There have been many episodes of tonsillitis. For example, 8 or more in one year.
- There is chronic infection and scarring of the tonsils, causing discomfort. This also means that future cases of tonsillitis are more likely.
- There is a disruption of sleep due to adenoid and tonsillar enlargement. This is especially if oxygen levels in the blood drop overnight.
- There are complications from the tonsillitis infections. Such as sepsis or an abscess.
- There are associated middle ear infections.
- In the case of children, if there is poor growth, behaviour concerns, etc.

There are also other factors to consider. For example, if there is a problem with the adenoids an adenoidectomy or adenotonsillectomy may be recommended.

Surgery can also be delayed for various reasons. For example, in the case of specific other medical conditions, such as heart disease or bleeding disorders.

### What if I choose not to have surgery?

This also needs to be discussed with a registered healthcare provider.



This surgery is often recommended because it's considered effective and quite safe. However, in some cases a long treatment of antibiotics can stop the repetitive cycle of tonsillitis. Also, some people find after a few years the tonsillitis or tonsillar enlargement stops being a problem for them.

Avoiding this surgery could mean that tonsillitis keeps occurring, or there continues to be trouble breathing and sleeping. Symptoms may worsen and disruptive sleep has been proven to be detrimental to many areas of health.

If tonsillitis keeps occurring, this can cause an abscess in the back of the throat. This would then require another procedure to drain the abscess.

### How do I decide if surgery is right for me?

The final decision to have surgery should only be made after consulting with a registered Ear Nose & Throat Surgeon (also known as an Otolaryngologist). The surgeon should be able to

discuss the benefits and risks, and answer all of your questions to your satisfaction.

Before surgery, your surgeon should ask you to sign a consent form. This form will help you understand the risks, and you should read it carefully and ask your surgeon if you have any more questions. To learn more about some of the risks involved, refer to the section about complications and risks below.

### What is recovery like?

Usually you will stay overnight and be sent home the next morning. Sometimes you will need to stay another day in hospital. For example, if you're experiencing a lot of pain or your oxygen levels are low.



Traditionally, patients have been told it's best to eat ice cream & jelly after this procedure. However, in order to properly heal, it's best to eat a well-balanced diet and chew all consistencies of food as soon as possible after surgery.

Some pain is common after the procedure. Rarely, people will say that the pain is severe. Strong painkillers can help during recovery and typically should be taken for about a week after surgery. Often the pain is worse about 7 to 10 days after surgery and then it starts to get better.

Adults can typically be back at work after 2 weeks.

Children can typically be back at school after 2 weeks.

There is a chance that during the recovery period there will be some bleeding from the

surgical site. If this happens you may have to return to hospital, you may be given antibiotics and fluids, and very rarely may need another surgery to seal the site of the bleeding.

### What are the risks of tonsillectomy?

At Melbourne ENT Group, we ensure that the operation is as safe as possible. But, as with any surgery, complications can occur and some of these can be serious and can even cause death. Any numbers relating to risk describe how often a particular complication occurs in people having this operation. Your surgeon may be able to tell you if the risk of a complication is higher or lower for you. There may be risks that you are particularly concerned about. If they haven't been discussed then please mention them to us.

### Complications specific to this surgery include:

- Tonsil remnants: Small pieces of the tonsil can be left behind after surgery. This can continue to cause infections.
- Lingual tonsillitis: There are some tonsil cells in the back of the tongue. These are not removed and can continue to still cause tonsillitis symptoms.
- Feeling something in the back of the throat: Some people (about 1 in 5) will have the sensation that there is something in the back of their throat. Some people report this for weeks to months after surgery.
- Change of taste: About 1 in 3 people experience this in the first two weeks after surgery, about 1 in 12 people for 6 months after surgery, and about 1 in 100 people for 2 years after surgery.
- Scarring: Rarely, the tissues around the tonsils can become scarred after the surgery, leading to difficulty with swallowing liquids, and air escaping out through the nose. This generally resolves but may need a second procedure to correct.

### General surgical complications:

Whenever an incision is made in the body, there is a risk of pain, bleeding, infection and scarring. We will minimise these risks in various ways.

- **Pain:** Common after tonsillectomy. Pain medication is given to reduce pain.
- **Bleeding:** If bleeding is heavy you may need a blood transfusion or another procedure to stop the bleeding.
- **Risk of significant bleeding during surgery** is less than 1 in 100 people, bleeding within two weeks is less than 6-10 in 100 people.
- **Infection:** If it occurs, this can usually be treated with antibiotics but in rare cases requires another procedure.

#### **Anaesthetic complications:**

Modern anaesthetic techniques are generally very safe, and precautions minimise the chance of any complications occurring. However, an anaesthetic can put a stress on your organs such as your heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. Your anaesthetist will be able to discuss with you in detail any of the possible complications of having an anaesthetic



#### **Summary:**

For the right patient, a tonsillectomy can improve their life for two main reasons:

- 1 - To reduce recurring bouts of tonsillitis, and/or,
- 2 - To improve breathing and quality of sleep.

Surgery is usually safe and effective but complications can happen. You need to know about these risks to help you to make an informed decision about surgery. Knowing about the risks will also help to detect and treat any problems early.

***If you have any questions about this procedure or to book a consultation: Please call our clinic at 1300 952 808.***

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