

Patient information

Leaving hospital

Helping my child cope



It is normal to have symptoms of stress after leaving hospital. It can be traumatic for your child to understand their illness or injury and how to manage this. It is not only your child that may be feeling this way but the whole family may also be affected. It is normal for you, as a parent to feel overwhelmed and worried about how to support your child or yourself when returning home.

What should I expect in the weeks following going home from hospital?

After staying at hospital it may be difficult to adjust back to your normal routine. Some children may have minor changes in behaviour or may keep thinking about what happened and become upset. It is common for parents and families to feel this way too. Some children and parents may find themselves avoiding thinking about the experience or avoiding the hospital or things that remind them of it. This should become easier with time, and support, and understanding of those around you.

Some common reactions after coming home from hospital:

In young children:

- Clinging to you or to other adults
- Thumb sucking or bed wetting
- Being afraid of the dark

In older children and teenagers:

- Being 'jumpy' or easily startled
- Sleeping or eating changes
- Complaints of minor illnesses such as headaches or bellyaches

In parents:

- Worrying about your child's safety
- Feeling 'on guard' even when you don't need to be
- Feeling anxious about caring for child and their physical health needs
- Getting upset when reminded of the experience, particularly if your child is in pain or discomfort

How to know if your child may need extra support

- Withdrawing from family, friends or their usual activities
- Seems to be on 'alert' for dangers a lot of the time
- Not wanting to return to school or altered performance in school
- Often becoming fearful, particularly if new fears develop
- Arguing a lot with family and/or their friends

Where can I get extra support for my child?

Most children and families adjust to going home from hospital within a few weeks so it is important you give yourselves this time. Some injuries and illness may have behaviour changes associated with them so it may be helpful to speak to your GP about this. If your child's reactions last longer than a few weeks or seem to be getting worse, talk to your GP or your child's School Nurse.

Ways to help your child cope after leaving hospital

- 1 Allow your children to talk about the event:** Sometimes parents try to protect children by avoiding talking about the event. They worry that they will upset their child and make things worse. Some people hope that by keeping quiet, their child will forget all about the event. In fact, talking is usually helpful but it needs to be done carefully and sensitively at the right time for your child. Some children clam up when they are worried or anxious, so try using a toy as a

'substitute' so you ask how Teddy is feeling about his hospital stay and he can ask you questions back rather than to your child directly. Alternatively, you could use dolls or draw pictures as a way of talking to your child.

- 2 Do try to make things as normal as possible:** By keeping in place as many of your child's normal routines as possible, the impact of an event on your child can be minimised and he or she can start to feel safer sooner.
- 3 Encourage your child to ask questions:** Try to answer them simply and honestly. They may need to ask the same question several times over, as a way of coming to terms with what has happened.

- 4 Encourage your child to spend time with friends:** After an illness or injury some children may be feeling a little 'different.' Encourage your child to invite a few friends over for some fun activities. It may be helpful to help your child to answer difficult questions their friends may have about their illness or hospital stay.



- 5 Do help your child to come up with a 'story' about what happened:** A story can help your child understand what happened. They may need help to come up with a story. It should make sense, put together the main facts and be truthful but appropriate for your child's age. Even young children can really benefit from having a story to explain what happened. A story can help children to make sense of their unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and sadness. Talking through the story can help correct misunderstandings, for example, children may believe that what happened was their fault or be confused about important facts. You can help to avoid this by using clear words, rather than metaphors.

- 6 Help your child do things on his or her own:** It is often tempting to do things for your child after an injury or illness. However it is more helpful for your child to start to do things on their own. As much as the injury or illness allows, encourage your child to do the things, such as chores and pleasurable activities he or she used to do.

- 7 Do look after yourself.** If you are upset by what has happened, it may be more difficult to talk to your child about it. If you are unsure whether you can manage to talk to your child about it right now, you could ask another important adult to help, such as a family member or trusted teacher. It is important that all adults keep to the same story so that your child is not confused.

- 8 Follow up with the doctor:** Even if your child is getting better, it is for the doctor to know how your child is coping, especially since so



and injuries have behaviour changes associated with them. Your doctor will be able to help you find out what's best for you and your family.

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