

Disclaimer

This publication is designed for the information of patients of Thames ENT Services Ltd. The information reflects the clinical practice of Mr Gavin Watters FRCS FRCS(ORL); the information given may not be comprehensive and patients should not act upon it without seeking professional advice.

Thames ENT Services Ltd does not endorse any commercial product or service mentioned or advised herein.

© Gavin Watters 2008

What are tonsils?

Tonsils are small glands at the back of the mouth, one on each side. They have a role in fighting infection, particularly in very young children, but they become less important as you get older.

Why have surgery?

The most common reason to remove the tonsils is because of severe sore throat due to infection (tonsillitis). If the frequency and severity of infection is such that it is having a significant impact on your life, such as having to take a lot of time off work or college, tonsillectomy may be the best treatment option. Quinsy is a particularly severe form of tonsil infection in which an abscess forms between the tonsil and muscle in the throat. After two quinsies it is recommended that the tonsils are removed.

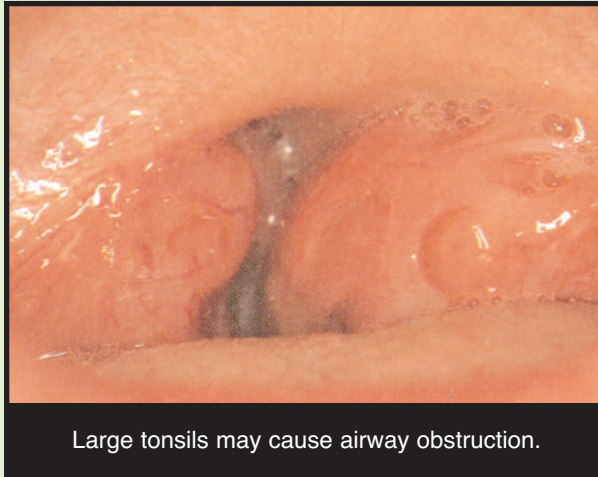
Tonsils may also be removed if they become very large and obstruct the airway. This may contribute to sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnoea and snoring. Tonsils are also removed if they may contain tumours or cancer. A tumour may cause enlargement of one tonsil, ulceration or bleeding. Tonsil tumours are very rare.

What if I don't have surgery?

Sometimes people have frequent episodes of tonsillitis over a period of a few months to a year and then the problem settles. Tonsillectomy is not recommended unless you have had recurring infections for over a year. Each infection can be treated with antibiotics but regular use of antibiotics over a prolonged period can in itself cause problems. Sleep apnoea can be managed with Nasal CPAP, which involves applying a face mask each night.

Before the operation

If working, make arrangements to take 2 weeks off work. You should inform your surgeon if you bruise or bleed excessively or if there is any such history in your family. If you have a cold, chest infection or tonsillitis within 2 weeks of your admission it is recommended that you contact the hospital to postpone your operation. If you smoke try to cut down or stop altogether in the days before surgery.



Large tonsils may cause airway obstruction.

About the operation

The operation is performed through the mouth under general anaesthetic and takes 30-45 minutes. After the operation you will be kept under close observation in the recovery area for a further 45 minutes, so you will be off the ward for about 1 1/2 hours. Most adults stay in hospital the night of the operation and are discharged the next morning.

You may feel sick immediately after the operation due to having swallowed blood during surgery. Medication will be given for this if necessary. You will have pain and this can be severe. In addition to being in the throat, pain is often felt in the ears (referred pain). You will be given medication to relieve the pain and it is important you take this regularly, particularly before meals. You should avoid Aspirin as it will increase the risk of bleeding. Eating and drinking following tonsillectomy is very important so that the throat heals well without infection. You can eat whatever you want, there is no recommended diet. You should be aware that the pain will get worse after your discharge from hospital. Usually the severity increases after 3 or 4 days to a peak around 7 to 8 days and then eases off. By 14 days the pain should have largely subsided.

If you look at your throat after surgery the appearance will be that of a grey/white slough. This is the normal healing appearance of the throat after surgery and will disappear after 10 to 14 days. The appearance may look like an infection but is to be expected and is quite normal. It is very important not to smoke in the week following tonsillectomy as this will significantly increase the risk of complications.

Possible complications

Tonsillectomy is a safe operation and complications are rare. The most significant complication is bleeding, which usually occurs a few days after surgery (secondary haemorrhage) and is often due to infection. Secondary haemorrhage occurs in approximately 5% of adult tonsillectomies and usually requires readmission to hospital and treatment with antibiotics. Very rarely (approximately 1% of adult tonsillectomies) it is necessary to control bleeding with a further operation. **Bleeding can be serious and you should contact a doctor straight away. You should contact the ward for advice or alternatively go to the nearest hospital casualty.**

Infection can occur without bleeding. You may have a fever and an unpleasant smell in your throat. In such circumstances it is advisable to have a course of antibiotics, so you should see your GP or contact the ward for advice.