

Otoplasty (correction of bat ears)

Otoplasty is usually done to set prominent ears back closer to the head or to reduce the size of large ears. Prominent ears can run in the family and affect one or both sides.

Most surgeons recommend that parents stay alert to their child's feelings about protruding ears - and it is important to not insist on the surgery until your child wants the change. Children who are uncomfortable about their ears and want the surgery are generally more cooperative during the process and will be happier with the outcome.

For children undergoing the procedure, it is best to wait until the ears are fully grown - at the age of approximately 5. This is also when children may become self-conscious of the problem. The ear is generally more mouldable during childhood but can be performed on adults as well.

It is important to understand what is involved in the process as well as the post-operative management. Please read below for more information.

More natural-looking ears

Most patients are very happy with the outcome of their otoplasty procedure. It is important to remember that the aim is improvement, not perfection. Don't expect both ears to match perfectly-perfect symmetry is both unlikely and unnatural in ears. If you've discussed the procedure and your expectations with your surgeon before the operation, chances are, you'll be pleased with the result.

Things to consider

All surgery carries some uncertainty and risk

When otoplasty surgery is performed by a qualified, experienced surgeon, complications are infrequent and usually minor. Nevertheless, as with any operation, there are risks associated with surgery and specific complications associated with this procedure. A small percentage of patients may develop a blood clot on the ear. It may dissolve naturally or can be drawn out with a needle. Rarely, a blood clot needs to be removed with a second procedure.

Infection in the cartilage of the ear is another rare complication, which can cause scar tissue to form. Such infections are usually treated with antibiotics; rarely,

surgery may be required to drain the infected area. The cartilage of the ear is somewhat elastic and can also bend back to its original shape to some degree over time. In about 1-2 % of cases, the procedure needs to be performed again.

Planning for surgery

In the initial meeting, your surgeon will evaluate your child's condition, and recommend the most effective technique. Your surgeon will also give you specific instructions on how to prepare your child for surgery if required. Photographs will also be taken to assess the individual needs of your child.

Where will the surgery be performed?

Otoplasty is usually performed as a day procedure (going home same day). Occasionally, your surgeon may recommend that the procedure be done as an inpatient procedure, in which case you can plan on your child staying overnight in the hospital. One adult may stay with your child overnight.

Type of anaesthesia

Otoplasty is performed under general anaesthesia, so your child will sleep through the operation. Numbing medicine is also used during the procedure so your child should be relatively pain free when they wake.

Other ear problems

Besides protruding ears, there are a variety of other ear problems that can be helped with surgery. These include: "lop ear," when the tip seems to fold down and forward; "cupped ear," which is usually a very small ear; and "shell ear," when the curve in the outer rim, as well as the natural folds and creases, are missing. Surgery can also improve large or stretched earlobes, or lobes with large creases and wrinkles. Surgeons can even build new ears for those who were born without them or who lost them through injury.

Procedure details

The surgery

Otoplasty surgery usually takes about 60 - 90 minutes although complicated procedures may take longer. The technique will depend on the individual problem in each ear.

With one of the more common techniques, the surgeon makes an incision in the back of the ear to expose the ear cartilage. He or she will then sculpt the cartilage and bend it back toward the head. Non-removable stitches may be used to help maintain the new shape.

In most cases, ear surgery will leave a faint scar in the back of the ear that will fade with time. Even when only one ear appears to protrude, surgery is usually performed on both ears for a better balance.

Getting back to normal

Children are usually up and around within a few hours of surgery. It is rare to stay in hospital overnight for this type of surgery.

The patient's head will be wrapped in a bulky bandage immediately following surgery to promote the best moulding and healing. Your surgeon will generally removed this dressing on the first or second post operative day to check the ears. The head is then re-banded for another 5-7days. The ears may throb or ache a little for a few days, but this can be relieved by simple pain medication.

After a week, the bandages will be removed. Occasionally, your surgeon will suggest wearing a headband, full time immediately following removal of the bandages, and then at night for a further period of time.

Stitches behind the ear will usually dissolve in about a week or 2.

Any activity in which the ear might be bent should be avoided for a month or so. Children can go back to school after the second bandage is removed if they're careful about playground activity. You may want to ask your child's teacher to keep an eye on your child for a few weeks.

Costs

It is important to have a clear idea about costs involved with your surgery in advance. The cost will include those related to your surgery, your anaesthesia and your hospital stay (even in cases for day surgery). Your surgeon's secretary is well placed to explain about your surgical costs and how the process works with your insurance. You will be advised about who your anaesthetists will be and they will be able to discuss the anaesthetics cost with you directly.

We understand that surgery for you or your loved one can be a stressful experience and our staff at Ear, Nose, Throat Victoria are here to help guide you through the process.