

PS05 Umbilical Hernia Repair (child)

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Local Information

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SOUTH AFRICA

What is an umbilical hernia?

An umbilical hernia is a lump at the umbilicus (belly button).

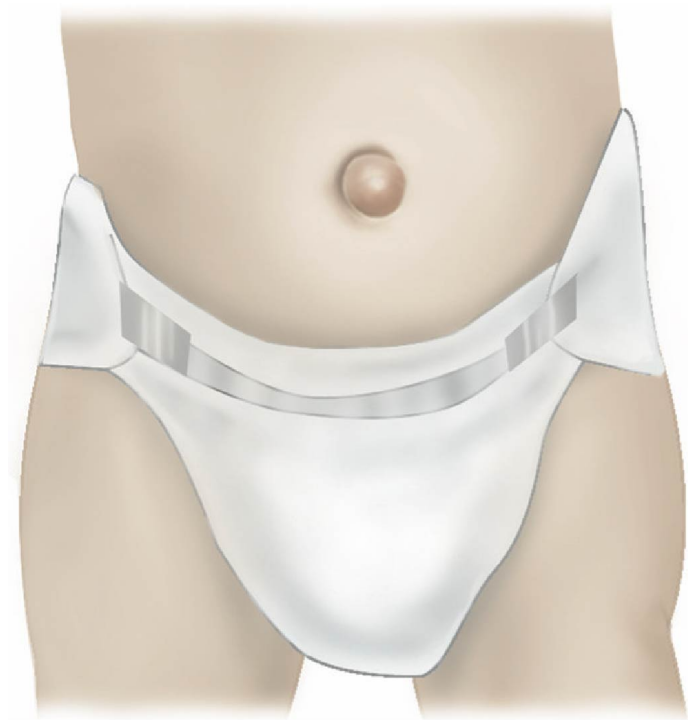
Your surgeon has recommended a hernia operation for your child. This document will give you information about the benefits and risks to help you to be involved in the decision. If you think your child is mature enough, it is best to discuss the operation with them so they can be involved in the decision too.

If you have any questions that this document does not answer, ask your surgeon or the healthcare team.

How does an umbilical hernia happen?

The abdominal cavity contains the intestines and other structures. These are protected by the abdominal wall, which is made up of four layers. The inner layer is a membrane. The second layer is a wall made of muscle. A layer of fat separates the muscle from the outer layer of skin.

Weak spots can develop in the layer of muscle, resulting in the contents of the abdomen, along with the inner layer, pushing through the abdominal wall. This produces a lump called a hernia.



An umbilical hernia

An umbilical hernia is caused by a weakness in the layer of muscle of the abdominal wall, just behind the umbilicus. The hernia is covered by skin.

All babies have an opening in the layer of muscle for the umbilical cord when they develop in the womb. The opening will usually close before birth but in about 1 in 5 babies born at term (after 37 weeks) the opening does not close causing a hernia.

The risk is higher in girls, African children and children who have a low birth weight. Some hernias may take a while to close. Most close in the first 3 years after birth. If your child has a hernia, you may notice a swelling, particularly when they cry or strain.

What are the benefits of surgery?

Your child should no longer have the hernia. Surgery should prevent your child from having any of the serious complications that a hernia can cause in adult life, and allow them to return to normal activities.

Are there any alternatives to surgery?

It is unusual for an umbilical hernia to cause serious problems such as the bowel getting stuck in the hernia. So it is safe, in children, to see if the hernia will close without surgery.

If your child is over 3 years old and they still have an umbilical hernia, the hernia is unlikely to close. Because the hernia can cause problems in adult life, surgery may be recommended.

What will happen if I decide that my child will not have the operation?

The skin of your child's umbilicus may stick out more with time.

The hernia can also be dangerous in an adult because the intestines or other structures within the abdomen can get trapped and have their blood supply cut off (strangulated hernia). This needs an urgent and larger operation, with a higher risk of developing serious complications. Although umbilical hernias hardly ever cause these complications in childhood (risk: less than 3 in 1 000), they are more likely to do so in adulthood.

What does the operation involve?

The healthcare team will carry out a number of checks to make sure your child has the operation they came in for. You can help by confirming to your surgeon and the healthcare team your child's name and the operation they are having.

The operation is performed under a general anaesthetic and usually takes about an hour. Your child may also have injections of local anaesthetic to help with the pain after the operation.

Your child may be given antibiotics during the operation to reduce the risk of infection.

Your surgeon will make a small cut around half of the umbilicus and close the opening in the tough layer of the abdominal wall with strong stitches. If there is a lot of excess skin around the umbilicus, they may trim it to help the wound to heal to a neat scar. If there is only a little excess skin, then your surgeon may leave it as it will shrink back over time to give a natural looking umbilicus.

Your surgeon will close the skin and apply a dressing.

What should I do about my child's medication?

Make sure your healthcare team knows about all the medication your child takes and follow their advice. This includes all blood-thinning medication as well as herbal and complementary remedies, dietary supplements, and medication you can buy over the counter.

What can I do to help make my child's operation a success?

Your child should try to maintain a healthy weight. They will have a higher risk of developing complications if they are overweight.

Your child can reduce their risk of infection in a surgical wound.

- Your child should have a bath or shower either the day before or on the day of their operation.
- Your child should keep warm around the time of the operation. Let the healthcare team know if your child feels cold.

What complications can happen?

The healthcare team will try to reduce the risk of complications.

Any numbers which relate to risk are from studies of people who have had this operation. Your doctor may be able to tell you if the risk of a complication is higher or lower for your child.

Some complications can be serious and can even cause death.

You should ask your doctor if there is anything you do not understand.

Your anaesthetist will be able to discuss with you the possible complications of having an anaesthetic.

General complications of any operation

- Bleeding during or after the operation. It is common to be bruised.
- Infection of the surgical site (wound) (risk: 1 in 100 children). It is usually safe for your child to shower after 2 days but you should check with the healthcare team. Let the healthcare team know if your child gets a high temperature, you notice pus in their wound, or if their wound becomes red, sore or painful. An infection usually settles with antibiotics but your child may need special dressings and their wound may take some time to heal. In some cases another operation might be needed. Do not give your child antibiotics unless you are told they need them.
- Allergic reaction to the equipment, materials or medication. The healthcare team is trained to detect and treat any reactions that might happen. Let the doctor know if your child has any allergies or if they have reacted to any medication or tests in the past.

Specific complications of this operation

- Developing a lump under the wound caused by stitches, or a collection of blood (haematoma) or fluid (seroma) (risk of haematoma: less than 2 in 100). This usually settles within a few weeks.
- Injury to structures within the hernia that come from the abdomen. Your child may need another operation.

- Unsightly appearance, as the skin of the umbilicus may continue to stick out. This is more likely if there was a lot of extra skin before the operation.

Covid-19

Coming into hospital increases the risk of you or your child catching or passing on Covid-19 (coronavirus) as you will be around more people than usual. This risk to your child increases further if the procedure involves their nose or throat. Practise social distancing, hand washing and wear a face covering when required.

Consequences of this procedure

- Pain. The healthcare team will give your child medication to control the pain and it is important that they take it as you are told so they can move about and cough freely.
- Unsightly scarring of the skin.

How soon will my child recover?

In hospital

After the operation your child will be transferred to the recovery area and then to the ward. They should be able to go home the same day. However, your doctor may recommend that your child stays a little longer.

If you are worried about anything, in hospital or at home, contact the healthcare team. They should be able to reassure you or identify and treat any complications.

Returning to normal activities

Your child should be able to return to school after a week but for 6 weeks should not do strenuous exercise.

The future

Most children make a full recovery.

However, the hernia can come back (risk: less than 1 in 400). This depends on the size of your child's hernia, the strength of their abdominal muscles, if they are overweight or if they have underlying medical problems. If the hernia comes back, your child may need another operation.

Summary

An umbilical hernia is a common condition. It is caused by a weakness in the abdominal wall just behind the umbilicus, resulting in the contents of the abdomen pushing the umbilicus outwards. If your child is over 3 years old, surgery is recommended to prevent serious complications that can happen in adult life.

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

Keep this information document. Use it to help you if you need to talk to the healthcare team.

Some information, such as risk and complication statistics, is taken from global studies and/or databases. Please ask your surgeon or doctor for more information about the risks that are specific to you.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare team would give you.

Acknowledgements

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