

How to Prepare Your Child for an MRI

A pediatric MRI can be a scary process, both for a child and a parent. It may feel overwhelming to prepare a little one for this procedure, and to manage your child's (and your own) emotions.

We're here to honor those feelings. We will walk you through the process of preparing your child, and share a few hard-earned tips for how to cope as a parent.

Explaining the MRI to Your Child

When heading into an MRI, you and your child might both be feeling nervous, and a little anxious. That is completely normal. An MRI is a very strange experience, and emotions can be very raw. It can help, if both you and your child know what to expect.

A great place to start is by consulting your hospital's child life specialist. These are social workers, therapists, and counselors that are trained to help explain medical procedures to children.

Here are a few additional tips for explaining surgery to your child:

Break It Down Into Kid-Friendly Language

If it's your child's first MRI, they probably have very little idea what it is. Teenagers might have heard of it, but little kids are less likely to have any frame of reference. You get to help them understand what is happening and why.

Make sure that first, you understand what an MRI is, and ask the doctor all the questions you need to know. After all, even though it's a fairly common test, some adults haven't had an MRI either.

Then boil it down to the essentials. For instance, you could say that they will go into a giant camera room, so the doctors can get some pictures of their (body part) to help them feel better. Remind them that an MRI doesn't hurt them, just makes loud and strange noises.

Take some time to answer their questions, open and honestly, and very gently. They can know about what's happening to their body. Just make sure it's in language that they can understand.

Finally, the more calmly you can talk about the MRI with them, the easier it could be for them to stay calm too.

“Tell the child exactly what is going to happen. Reassure the child that you will be with them and that the doctors and nurses will take good care of them. Much love, kisses and hugs.” –Ann B.



Use Roleplaying to Practice

Parents sometimes find it helpful to roleplay what an MRI will look like. This could be making a sheet fort or a cardboard tunnel and having your child lay inside while you bang pots and pans. Some families might even have a play tunnel already to use for this activity.

While not practicing, reading books, or watching movies about an MRI, especially if it's another child going into an MRI, could also help. That way they actually see what it can look like, for someone their age. This might be especially useful for older children, who might think actual roleplaying is silly.

“The doctor and the specialist operating the equipment are awesome and they are there to take care of you. Practice lying on your back, hands over your head for 10 min with headphones playing music and your eyes closed. Increase time to 20 min but have your arms folded across your chest. Place arms where you know they will be. Practice blocking everything out except the music.” –Steve L.

Tour the Actual MRI Room at the Hospital

This is not possible at all hospitals, but some will let you and your child go in and see where they will get an MRI. This can be a special treat, because not only does it help your child prepare and not be surprised by the equipment, and it can also make them feel like VIP visitors, and that they are being taken care of.

Before you schedule a tour, think about whether or not this will help your child feel more or less nervous. Some children might get more scared after being in a hospital with strangers, and seeing a big machine. And some will feel more excited and prepared. It depends on the little one, and you know them best.

“Some hospitals will allow you to take a child in so they can see it, and explain it before the procedure. I would recommend that, if it's possible.” –Elaine H.

Show Your Child How They Can Be Involved in Their Own Care

Losing control can be scary for anyone, and that includes children. Involve your child in their care process when it's appropriate – that way, they can still make some choices and have some control over the situation.

Try asking them what music they'd like to listen to inside, what they'd like to wear to the hospital, or maybe what stuffed animal they'd like to carry with them to the MRI room.

If this is going to be part of a longer stay, enlist their help in packing their hospital bag. Pack all the essentials, but then let them pick out a favorite toy, stuffed animal, book, blanket, or pillow. This can make their stay feel safer, and help them regain their confidence and sense of control.



Supporting Your Child Throughout the MRI

Each child is different, and the level of support they need can change over time. Here are a few places to begin when it comes to helping your child throughout the surgery process:

Before the MRI

You'll want to talk to your child about their MRI in advance. General guidelines for telling a child about a procedure vary by age, and are:

- Toddlers: Day in advance
- Preschoolers: 3-5 days can be told a day in advance
- School-aged: 1 week in advance
- Teenagers: When the MRI has been decided upon

Be gentle and calm when you tell them, and be ready for any number of emotional responses. A toddler might continue playing without a care in the world. A teenager might understand the implications of an MRI, and be more anxious. All emotions are okay.

Most MRIs don't need much medical preparation, although if the child is getting a sedative, they may have to have an empty stomach. This could be the worst part of the whole experience for some kids!

They will also have to take off any metal belts, jewelry, or devices. Typically, electronics like phones or iPads, aren't allowed in the MRI room either. Gently remind them that they will probably have to take these things off and leave them outside the room.

This is also when some kids (and adult patients too!) will opt to take an oral anxiety medication. This is especially popular for children who will have to have an IV for either a sedative, or contrast fluid. You can ask your doctor about an anxiety medication if you think it might be a good fit for your child.

During the MRI

One of the hardest parts about an MRI is having to stay still for so long. Most MRIs take 15 – 90 min, but some can be longer. And 15 min can be a long time for a fidgety kiddo.

There are quite a few ideas out there to help your child stay calm while in the MRI. These include listening to music or even an audiobook while in the MRI. Some hospitals even offer movies for kids. Another popular idea is to play imagination games, like making up their own story, or coming up with their own songs to go along with the sounds.

If you have a more nervous child, they might like wearing an eye mask to help them fall asleep, or so they can't see the tiny space. They can often take a blanket or stuffed animal in the MRI with them too. You can also request a sedative or anxiety medicine, to help little ones relax and fall asleep.

Practically, know that the MRI room might be really cold, so bringing a blanket to cover up with can be a good idea. The MRIs can be long, but there will be breaks, so if you think it will help, ask the doctor to let your child know when they can break a little bit. They also might hand them an emergency button. Let them know what it does ahead of time, and to only press it if it's a true emergency.

“If you can arrange your child to have the MRI at a children's hospital, their MRI suites are set up for children. Whether that is different lighting, possible movies to watch, ability to listen to music. A lot of suites the child can choose the environment they would like to have. It takes their mind off the actual exam.” –Craig W.

“I'm 15 now, and I've been having MRIs every three months for the past 12 years. You get used to it. But what parents of little kids might not know is how hard it is to stay still. What I usually do is move around and get settled inside the MRI tube, and then let them know I'm ready. It is also helpful when they put a pad under your knees. Sometimes they hand me a ball that is actually an emergency call button. And the MRI room is always really cold. You want to have a blanket, but you also don't want to get overheated in the tunnel of an MRI.

–Ana vanKoeverden, Age 15

After the MRI

Usually you can be in the room with your child when they are having an MRI, especially if they are young. They can often eat and drink right after, and don't have any lasting side effects from the MRI process.

It's rare that IVs administered during an MRI (a sedative or contrast solution) have side effects. The sedative will usually be out of their system in 1-2 hours, and the contrast solution in about 24.

It is still though, completely normal for them to feel a little anxious, confused, or overwhelmed by the experience. Find a little way to celebrate their bravery, with a special treat of some sort. (Ice cream is always a popular choice!)

And finally, even though an MRI is a fairly common procedure, ask your medical team what post-MRI care should look like for your child.



How Parents Can Self-Soothe

Having a child go through an MRI is hard on you as a parent, too. Especially if you are already learning to cope with a bigger prognosis. Here are a few ways to take care of yourself:

Prepare Yourself - Mentally and Emotionally

When you first hear that your child needs an MRI, you might be filled with a whole range of emotions, from anxiety, to hope, to fear, and maybe even frustration, anger, and guilt. That's okay. All of these emotions are normal.

To help your own anxiety, take some time to learn what you can about an MRI. What options do you have at your local hospital? What is the equipment like?

Getting a better sense for what to expect might help with all the stress and uncertainty surrounding your child's test.

Ask questions

Never feel bad for asking questions. It's always okay to ask for clarification, more information, or for examples. Medical jargon can be complicated, but you are your child's best advocate.

Asking your child's medical team about what happens before, during, and after the MRI can be a great way to regain a sense of control around this situation. Sometimes knowing the details yourself can help you feel better about trusting the medical staff to take care of your child, and take some of the pressure off.

Start a CaringBridge Site

An MRI may just be a part of your child's health journey. CaringBridge is an easy way to keep all your loved ones, and your support network, in the loop. You and your family may need more love now than ever. A CaringBridge site makes it easier to request help – with food, chores, transportation, childcare, or even finances – by connecting you with your community.



To learn more or start a site today visit:
www.caringbridge.org/pediatric

Take care of yourself

This might be the last thing on your mind, especially if you have work, other children, pets, and responsibilities to attend to on top of all this. Take some time to take care of your own body and mind, when preparing for your child's MRI, and during the rest of their prognosis.

This can include things like:

- Eating healthy favorite foods (tip: pack hospital snacks)
- Try to get 7-9 hours of sleep
- Find a good book to take your mind off of things
- Try some deep breathing exercises to calm your nervous system
- Talk to a family member or friend about how you are feeling

CaringBridge is a global, nonprofit social network dedicated to helping family and friends communicate with and support loved ones during a health journey. We offer free, personal, protected websites for people to easily share updates and receive strength and encouragement from their community. This article was pulled from our families' insights in collaboration with experts.

To learn more or start a site today visit: www.caringbridge.org/pediatric

