

Anesthesia for Radiology Tests

This handout will help answer your questions about why anesthesia is sometimes used for radiology tests such as MRIs.

Why might my child need anesthesia for a radiology test?

It is very important that your child lie still during radiology testing. Some tests like MRIs and Nuclear Medicine tests, such as bone scans, can take 45 minutes or more. Any movement during the test can change results and information found from the test. The test is not painful, but the MRI is very noisy, so young children or children with developmental challenges or anxiety might not be able to stay still for the entire test. For these reasons, general anesthesia is sometimes used to make sure that a child lies completely still during testing.

What if I think my child will lay still for the test?

Young children are often scheduled for anesthesia during radiology tests. However, some tests, such as CT tests, are short. If you think your child can lie still without anesthesia for the entire test, please discuss this when you schedule the test. Follow your child's eating and drinking instructions in case anesthesia ends up being needed after all to prevent rescheduling the test.

What is the difference between sedation and anesthesia?

Sedation and anesthesia don't mean the same thing. With sedation, your child may be sleepy, but will remain conscious (awake) and can move and respond to commands. With anesthesia, your child will be unconscious (asleep) and will be completely still. The medicine can be given through an intravenous (IV) tubes that goes into a vein or by breathing in gas.

Why can't my child eat or drink before the test?

Having an empty stomach is important for your child's safety. When your child is under anesthesia, muscles that keep food and liquids in the stomach become relaxed. This increases the chance of food and liquid leaving the stomach and being breathed into the lungs. This can cause serious lung infections and can lead to a hospital stay. This is much less likely to happen when the stomach is empty.

My child is afraid of needles. Can they have anesthesia for before the IV is started?

Starting the IV after your child is asleep from the anesthesia may or may not be possible. This depends on the type of test your child is having, your child's age and medical history. If this is not possible, we have other resources to help in IV placement. These include help from a Child Life Specialists and using local numbing medicine on the skin. You will meet with the anesthesia team before any medicine is given. Please discuss your concerns with your anesthesiologist, who will partner with you to find the safest plan of care for your child.

To Learn More

- Radiology Anesthesia Department
206-987-2361
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

Can I be with my child while the test is taking place?

For your child's safety, you are not allowed into the testing room. While your child is asleep, they will be closely watched by the anesthesia team at all times. Once the test is over, your child will be moved to the recovery area and will be watched by the nursing team. You can be with your child during the recovery stage when they begin to wake up.

How long will my child be sleepy?

Your child may wake up right away or may sleep for up to 1 hour after anesthesia. They may be tired or drowsy for up to 8 hours after they wake up.

When can my child eat and drink again?

Once your child is completely awake, the nurses will allow them to drink liquids. After drinking liquids, your child may eat solid food.

When can my child go home?

If your child is over 6 months old, they can go home when they are able to completely move or walk on their own.

If your child is less than 6 months old, they will stay up to 2 hours after the test.

Some children with complex medical conditions may need to stay overnight for monitoring.

The safety of your child is our top priority and the nurses caring for your child will let you know when it is safe to go home.

Are there any instructions to follow at home?

It is important to watch your child closely for 4 to 6 hours once they are home. It will take this long for the anesthesia medicine to completely wear off. During this time your child may be more clumsy than usual. To be safe, do not let your child run, swim, climb, ride a bicycle, tricycle, scooter or skateboard, or drive a motorized vehicle for 12 to 24 hours after going home.
