There are many reasons why a premature baby or a baby with health problems might need surgery. In some cases, the need for surgery may be known before the baby is born. In other cases, the need for surgery may occur shortly after birth or during the baby’s stay in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Your baby’s health care team will advise whether the surgery is needed right away or if there are other steps that may be taken before surgery. If your baby requires surgery, the health care team can help to answer your questions.

Who is involved in the surgery? Depending on the type of surgery required or factors unique to each hospital, the health care staff may include:

• Pediatric surgeon — this doctor has special training to perform surgery in infants and children. In some cases, this person also may have special training to work with certain organs, such as the heart.
• Anesthesiologist [an-uhs-thee-zee-OL-uh-jist] — a doctor trained to give medicines that sedate the infant (put him or her to sleep) or reduce pain
• Nurse anesthetist [uh-NES-thi-tist] — a nurse specially trained to give anesthesia
• Surgical nurse — a nurse trained to assist with surgery
• Surgical resident — a doctor who is training to become a surgeon and may assist with the surgery

Other staff may also assist the surgery team.

What are the general steps taken for the surgery? Before the surgery, doctors and nurses explain the process. Your baby will have a pre-operation workup — this is a series of steps to assess any special needs required to prepare your baby for surgery. This process may include giving your baby medicines to help prevent infections or other problems during surgery.

How will pain be treated in my baby? Pain is managed with great care in babies. Studies show that infants who have less stress due to pain also have better outcomes after surgery.* Because babies react in different ways to pain, doctors and nurses use a baby’s cues and other measures to assess pain and devise a plan to help manage it. Babies are assessed for pain regularly. Medicine is chosen according to your baby’s unique needs. Often, the plan to manage a baby’s pain may include a mix of factors, such as medicines that reduce pain only in a certain body area, medicines that sedate the baby to reduce stress, and other comfort measures that reduce stress in infants.

What can parents do? If your infant requires surgery, there are some key steps you can take to remain active in your infant’s care:

- Keep informed — Find out what treatment your baby needs and why he or she needs it.
- Ask questions — The NICU staff knows parents are under a great deal of stress and may have many questions. Keep in mind that it is helpful to ask questions again and again, until you are certain you understand.
- Learn about ways to keep infections under control. Having surgery may increase a baby’s risk for getting an infection. Every step taken to prevent infection can help reduce or avoid this problem.

As always, you play a key role in soothing your infant. In some cases, this simply may mean sitting quietly by your baby’s bedside. At other times, it may include touching or holding your baby.

There are two general types of surgery:

- Open — the surgeon performs the required surgery through a full incision (cut) in the area affected.
- Laparoscopic [LAP-er-uh-skop-ik] — the surgeon performs the required surgery through a small hole or cut in the skin using a scope to help guide the procedure. At the moment, this type of process can be used in small babies only for certain types of surgery. Studies show this technique may help reduce the need for pain medicines, may increase recovery rates, and may decrease the risk of infection in infants.* This technique is still new for babies, and may not yet be used in all hospitals.


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*Take a closer look at these Pediatrix topics
Topics A - F can be found online.

**cues** - B3 - Cues: “How does my baby feel?”

Find the research

NICHD Cochrane Neonatal Review Group
www.nichd.nih.gov/cochrane

Neonatology on the Web
www.neonatology.org

Find out more: these websites may be helpful

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org/parents

American College of Surgeons, What is a pediatric surgeon?
www.facs.org/public_info/yourhealth/pedsurg.pdf

The American Pediatric Surgical Association
www.eapsa.org/parents

Healthy Steps for Young Children
www.healthysteps.org

The Maternal & Child Health Library at Georgetown University
www.mchlibrary.info

This information is for educational purposes only and is not intended to substitute for professional medical advice. Always consult with a health care professional if you have any questions about the health of your baby.