

What to Expect in the Post Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU)

This handout will help you feel more comfortable and prepared when helping your child in the PACU or “wake up room”.

Preparing for Your Child’s Recovery

It is normal to feel nervous or unsure about what to expect during this time.

The PACU

The PACU at AFCH uses an open concept space. It is separated by curtains to let nurses safely care for all our patients. While we strive for privacy, because of the open environment you may:

- See nurses caring for other patients.
- Hear alarms or equipment sounds from other patients.
- Notice crying or distress from other patients waking up after surgery.
- Hear nurses asking other nurses to get things, so they do not have to leave the bedside.

This environment may seem overwhelming, but these experiences are normal.

Your Child’s PACU Stay

You will be reunited with your child as they start to wake up from anesthesia. During this time, your child will be monitored closely by nurses. You may see:

- Monitoring equipment attached to your child.
 - Blood pressure cuff
 - Pulse oximeter sticker
 - Heart monitor wires
- Periods of sleep alternating with being awake or restless.

- Your child may have discomfort or pain. Nurses in the PACU will assess pain and give medicine as needed.
- Nausea and vomiting can be side effects of medicines, surgery and anesthesia. Preventative medicines are often given in the operating room. More medicine is available in PACU, if needed.
- Confusion or delirium may happen while waking from anesthesia. This can look like:
 - Inconsolable crying
 - Distress
 - Pushing people away
 - Thrashing in bedThis is temporary. Your child may receive medicine or may need some time for this to resolve.

How Parents Can Help

You are an important part of your child’s recovery. Things that may help comfort your child include:

- Speaking calmly and softly.
- Holding their hand.
- Offering reassurance and remaining calm and patient as they wake up.
- Bringing a favorite comfort item.

Leaving the PACU

Every child wakes up differently from anesthesia. Recovery times vary depending on many factors. Your child is safe to leave the PACU when they:

- Are awake and/or responding to voice and light touch.
- Breathing comfortably.
- Have their pain and nausea under control.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 6/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8524.