Tonsils and Tonsilitis

In this 1978 report, NBC's Dr. Art Ulene offers a look at tonsils and when its a good idea to have them removed.

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JANE PAULEY, co-host:
Today programs resident physician, Dr. Art Ulene, was here recently to discuss a very important, very common health problem. He spoke with Tom Brokaw.

TOM BROKAW, co-host:
Art Ulene is with us this morning to talk about a subject that will get a lot of attention in those households were there are small children who have chronic sore throats or problems at the back of their throat of one kind or another. We’re talking about tonsils. What they mean and what the current medical assessment of their importance is. Art?

ART ULENE, M.D. reporting:
The answer is confusing and controversial. The tonsils, which lie at the back of the throat, are actually large lymph glands. They filter out germs, which enter the tissues and they help to defend the body against infection. Times, however, the tonsils themselves become infected. The common cause of this infection is the streptococcus bacteria. Infections with this germ cause high fever and a very sore throat, the so-called strep throat.

When Rachel McWilliams turned 8 years old, one of her birthday presents was an unwanted one, a case of strep throat. It was her fifth case of strep in a year, but it was likely to be her last ever. Rachel is having her tonsils taken out. She is looking forward to not having to miss any more school and not having to take medicine or shots for her frequent infections.

RACHEL McWILLIAMS: I get infections sometimes, but they go away pretty fast.
UNIDENTIFIED INTERVIEWER: What does the doctor have to give you for the strep infection?
McWILLIAMS: A shot, which I hate.
UNIDENTIFIED INTERVIEWER: Well he hasn’t given you shots all the time.
McWILLIAMS: Only if I tell the nurses to put in big, red letters ‘I do not want shots’.
Dr. ULENE: At Kaiser Permanente Hospital in Panorama City the policy in the ear, nose, and throat department, headed by Dr. Ted Eckberg, is that the tonsils stay in unless there is a very good reason to remove them. Tonsillectomies are not routine here.
Dr. THEODORE ECKBERG: Years ago it was fairly cut and dry. The children had throat infections and they got their tonsils out because we had nothing else to do for them. We didn’t have antibiotics and the child had little else to do, but have the tonsillectomy. Today, the antibiotic field has come in and things have changed quite a bit. We now don’t just take every child’s tonsils out and really it’s not indicated to take every child’s tonsils out, and probably the more controversial area is the how much infection does a child need even with the antibiotics to take the tonsils out. And this is somewhat variable around the country depending on whom you are talking to. But it is generally thought that if you have say five well-documented episodes of tonsillitis in the course of a year certainly that would be a pretty good indication for taking the tonsils out.

Dr. ULENE: Dr. Eckberg and a growing number of ear and nose and throat specialists feel most children should not have their tonsils out, unless they have frequent and serious strep infections. Rachel fits this category. How does she feel about having an operation? Well, she is looking forward to the ice-cream that she has been promised afterwards.

There are certain times when the tonsils should not be taken out, for example, when a child has a history of bleeding disorders, when the child is anemic, and when the tonsils are acutely infected. In this latter case when the operation, if necessary, the operation must be postponed until the infection subsides. There is still considerable controversy about this operation. So what do you do if the doctor recommends tonsillectomy for your child? My advice is, get a second opinion.

BROKAW: Art, why is it necessary to have tonsillectomies in this age of antibiotics, which should be able to cure strep throat after all.

Dr. ULENE: Well you can cure the strep throat, but in some of these children the tonsils remain so large that they actually obstruct breathing. They create speech problems or breathing problems for the child. But the child is just sick so often that they need to come out.

BROKAW: A lot of people are confused about the term adenoids when it’s used with tonsils and why they should be taken out.

Dr. ULENE: Well, the adenoids are similar kinds of lymph glands, though smaller, which are located higher up in the nasal pharynx. It’s in the throat area, but up closer to the nose. These are removed at the same time, or separately, if they are chronically infected causing obstructions so that the child can’t breathe through their nose.

BROKAW: If the tonsils are one of our defenses against germs, when we are children especially, what happens when they’re removed? Do we, are children more susceptible to colds?

Dr. ULENE: No they really don’t seem to be. Actually it does not make a lot of difference in the amount of colds or flu a child will have. It appears to only affect the strep throat problem.

BROKAW: Art Ulene on the subject of great interest of parents of children especially: tonsils. Thanks Art.