

# Atlas of Healthcare Variation

## Consumer summary

### Information on surgery (tonsil removal and grommet insertion) in Aotearoa New Zealand

This is a summary of the [surgical procedures domain of the Atlas of Healthcare Variation](#).

The Atlas is an online tool showing differences in the type and quality of health care people receive in different district health board (DHB) regions. It is published by the Health Quality & Safety Commission.

### What the Atlas shows

This Atlas domain shows tonsil removal and grommet insertion rates for children in public hospitals around Aotearoa New Zealand are up to three times as high in some DHBs as in others.

Over the 10 years the Atlas has captured data for this domain:

- **tonsil removal rates** have remained steady at around four operations per 1,000 children
- tonsil removal rates were significantly higher in non-Māori, non-Pacific children compared with Māori and Pacific children
- the level of variation between DHBs has stayed consistently wide at around three-fold
- **grommet insertion rates** significantly reduced in 2013 and have stayed this way through 2018
- rates were significantly higher in non-Māori, non-Pacific children aged 0–4 years despite evidence suggesting Māori and Pacific children aged 0–9 years are more likely to have middle ear disease than other children.
- the level of variation between DHBs remained greater than two-fold.

The Atlas figures do not include privately funded operations.

### About tonsil removal

Tonsils may be removed to treat repeat tonsillitis or sleep-disordered breathing.

Some children with tonsillitis get better without surgery. Surgery is recommended only when the sore throat is disabling and prevents normal functioning.

### About grommets

Grommets are inserted to treat recurrent acute middle ear infections (called otitis media) or glue ear (otitis media with effusion).

They can improve hearing for the first six months but may have no effect on language development or understanding in otherwise healthy children. This means the decision to

operate on children with recurrent acute otitis media or chronic otitis media with effusion needs to be balanced carefully against the likelihood of the problem resolving itself naturally.

Māori and Pacific children have higher rates of glue ear and associated complications. However, for reasons that are unclear, Māori children don't have higher rates of grommet insertion.

It is not known what is the ideal rates for surgical tonsil removal and grommet insertion are. High rates of surgery are not necessarily better, and low rates are not necessarily worse.

### **Further information**

Health Navigator has information on [tonsil removal](#) and [ear infections \(including grommets\)](#).