

Staying Active Before and After Surgery for Pediatric Patients

This information explains how your child can stay active before and after surgery and how Memorial Sloan Kettering's (MSK) rehabilitation services can help.

About MSK's Rehabilitation Services

Activity and movement are important to help your child grow and develop. Being in the hospital can limit your child's normal activity, and mobility and play skills can decrease as a result. MSK's rehabilitation team is here to keep your child active and engaged while they're in the hospital.

The rehabilitation services at MSK will help your child regain their strength after surgery and improve their ability to do everyday activities. The rehabilitation team is made up of occupational therapists (OT) and physical therapists (PT) that will begin working with your child within 24 hours after surgery. Your child's participation in occupational and physical therapy is an important part of their recovery after surgery. You should encourage your child to participate in physical and occupational therapy and help them during the sessions.

Occupational therapists

OTs help improve the skills you need to do important everyday activities. After surgery, your child's OT will help them with any problems they may have with self-care tasks, such as dressing or grooming, play activities, and school or work based skills (see Figure 1).

During your child's occupational therapy visit, the OT will:

- Talk with your child about their everyday activities and ask how they were doing

those activities before surgery.

- Check the strength, sensation (feeling), and movement in your child's fingers and arms.
- Ask questions to see if your child can understand directions, solve problems, pay attention, and remember.
- See how your child performs everyday activities, including:
 - Getting in and out of bed
 - Putting on and taking off clothing
 - Walking to and from the bathroom
 - Brushing their teeth
 - Playing with toys



Figure 1. Working with an OT

Physical therapists

PTs work to improve your ability to move and function after surgery. PTs help you regain the strength, balance, and coordination you need to do activities, such as walking, climbing the stairs and participating in play or sports (see Figure 2).

During your child's physical therapy visit, the PT will:

- Talk with your child about their home and school environment, ability to do everyday activities, and any problems that they may have with moving their body.
- Measure the strength, balance, movement, and sensation in their arms and legs.
- Check their breathing and ability to cough.
- See how much help your child needs with everyday activities, including:
 - Getting in and out of bed

- Standing up from a chair
- Walking up and down stairs

Helping Your Child Prepare for Surgery



Figure 2. Working with a PT

- It's important for your child to stay active before their surgery. They can do this by going for walks, exercising, and continuing to do their everyday activities as usual.
- Make sure your child follows their daily routines, including self-care tasks, such as showering and grooming.
- Pack whatever your child needs to continue their routines during their hospital stay, including pajamas, clothing, shoes, and a toothbrush from home. You can also bring their favorite toys or games to help comfort them during their hospital stay.
- If your child needs any special equipment or items to help with movement, such as crutches, a walker, wheelchair, or arm or leg braces, be sure to bring them with you. This will help your child with moving and keep them safe after surgery.
- Look at a calendar with your child to show them the day of their surgery. Bring the calendar to the hospital and use it to keep track of the days following surgery.
- Make sure to let your child know that they will meet with an OT and PT after surgery and talk with them about what to expect. Let them know that they will be helped out of bed to be able to play, sit in a chair, or walk around.

What to Expect After Surgery

After surgery, your child will have many intravenous (IV) lines and medical tubes

connected to them to help give them medications and drain fluids. Your child's OT and PT will manage their lines and tubes in order to help them move safely and participate in therapy.

If your child needs continued oxygen to help with breathing, a respiratory therapist and nurse will also work with their OT and PT to make sure your child gets the support they need during therapy.

Helping Your Child Recover From Surgery

Participate in physical and occupational therapy sessions

Within 24 hours after surgery, your child's PT and OT will begin working with them. How often these sessions take place will depend on the needs of your child.

The PT and OT will work with your child to help them:

- Regain their strength
- Move around on their own
- Reduce their pain
- Improve their breathing
- Help with coughing and clearing secretions (mucus) from their lungs
- Increase their alertness and ability to follow directions
- Do their everyday activities
- Help them get ready for their return home

Engage your child

Anesthesia (medication to make you sleepy), medications, and an unfamiliar environment can make your child feel confused. It can also be hard for them to keep track of the time or where they are. Talk to your child about being in the hospital, what the date and time of day are, and what the nurses, doctors, and therapists are in the room to do.

Keep the shades up and lights on during the daytime. Turn the lights off at night to

help encourage a routine sleep schedule.

Encourage your child to play games and do activities that they enjoy, such as playing card games, reading, coloring, and doing puzzles. A good place to do these activities is out of bed while sitting in a chair whenever possible.

Walk around

It's important for your child to walk around after surgery. Walking every 2 hours is a good goal. This will help prevent blood clots in their legs, improve their strength, and reduce the length of their hospital stay. Your child's nurses and therapists will help them with sitting up and getting out of bed within 24 hours after surgery.

Do deep breathing exercises

Taking deep breaths can sometimes be painful after surgery because of incisions (surgical cuts) in your chest or abdomen (belly). To help improve your child's breathing, their therapist and nurse will practice deep breathing exercises with them by blowing bubbles and using an incentive spirometer (see Figure 3). An incentive spirometer is used to help expand your lungs and prevent pneumonia. For more information, ask your nurse for the resource *How to Use Your Incentive Spirometer* (www.mskcc.org/pe/incentive_spirometer) or you can search for it on www.mskcc.org/pe.



Figure 3. Using an incentive spirometer

Contact Information

If you have any questions about helping your child stay active before or after surgery, call the MSK's Rehabilitation Service at 212-639-7833.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Staying Active Before and After Surgery for Pediatric Patients - Last updated on June 28, 2019

All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center