

Caring for your halo vest at home

Purpose

- The halo vest is a treatment for a person who has a broken neck. The halo vest prevents your head and neck from moving, allowing the bones to heal. You may have to wear your halo vest for up to 12 weeks.

Things to remember

- You will be assessed regularly by your spine physician.
- For caregivers helping a person in a halo vest, avoid hitting the metal framework as this can transmit sound through the pins in the skull to the ear. This sound can be extremely loud to the individual wearing the vest.
- Do not drive. You are not insured in the province of Ontario to drive with a halo vest.
- Keep the vest lining dry at all times.
- If the vest liner should get wet, you can dry it with a hair dryer on a cool setting.
- The metal bars that are attached to the vest should never be used to turn or lift the patient. All movement is transmitted to the pins and this may cause the pins to loosen.
- Avoid twisting or lifting anything heavier than 5 pounds.
- Never attempt to make adjustments to the vest yourself. Contact your halo nurse or spine surgeon.
- The halo nurse can be reached at **416 480-4902** or at tracy.anthony@sunnybrook.ca from Monday –Friday.
- If you have an emergency over night or on the weekend, please call the Sunnybrook operator at 416 480-4244 and ask to speak to the spine resident or spine fellow on call or come to the Sunnybrook Emergency Department.

Parts of the halo vest

- A halo ring or crown is fixed to your head by four pins – one pin above each eyebrow and one behind each ear. The pins go approximately 1 mm into the skull.
- The halo ring is attached to the vest by metal posts that keep your head and neck in a stable position.
- The vest is made of a hard plastic shell and is lined with a fleece-like material.



Pin site care

- The pin sites will need to be cleaned at least once a day. They can be cleaned with a normal saline solution, hydrogen peroxide or soap and water.
- Clean each pin site using a cotton tipped swab e.g. a Q-tip or gauze square. Remember that a new swab or gauze square will need to be used for each pin site.
- Have someone check and clean the pin sites behind your ears for any of the problems listed below. A flashlight may be helpful to fully assess the back pin sites.
- Antibiotic ointment to pin sites is not recommended.
- Signs of a pin site infection or loosening of the pin:
 - ❖ Redness or swelling of the skin around the pins
 - ❖ Discharge at the pin site
 - ❖ An open area where the skin has pulled away from the pin
 - ❖ Pain or tenderness around the pin site
 - ❖ Clicking noise that only the individual wearing the vest can hear

If any of the above occurs, contact your halo nurse or spine surgeon for further direction.

Hygiene

- You cannot have a shower while in the halo vest.
- Sponge baths should be done daily while lying flat.
- The skin under the vest should be looked at daily during bathing for redness, sores or blisters.
- If redness, sores, or blisters are present, contact your halo nurse or spine surgeon.

How to wash under the vest:

- You will need the assistance of another person.
- While lying in bed gently turn onto your side.
- Undo buckles and straps on the side of the vest that is facing up
- Protect the liner of the vest by inserting a towel between your skin and the vest.
- Wash skin using a gentle cleanser and dry thoroughly.
- Fasten the buckles and repeat turning to the opposite side.
- Do not use lotion or powder under the vest.

How to shower the lower part of your body:

- You may need the assistance of another person.
- Use of a bath seat with a back rest and a hand held shower head is recommended.
- Use a non-slip bath mat on the bottom of the tub to prevent slipping.
- Be sure to keep the liner dry at all times.

Hair washing

- You will need the assistance of another person.
- Thread a towel through the bars of the vest and tuck it under the vest to keep the liner dry. You can also use plastic wrap, a plastic bag, or a plastic poncho to keep the liner dry.
- Your caregiver can use an adjustable hand-held showerhead or a pitcher of water to wet your hair while you lean over a sink.
- A mild shampoo such as baby shampoo is recommended. Shampoo and conditioner around the pin sites is not harmful. Ensure that all of the shampoo/conditioner is rinsed off thoroughly.



Dressing

- Alterations to clothing may be necessary.
- Only dress while in a sitting position.
- Following any needed alterations, step into a t-shirt or loose tank top. You will find it easiest to wear loose fitting clothing over your vest (one or two sizes larger than your usual size). For example, you can wear a zipped or buttoned cardigan, hoodie or sweatshirt.
- Wear slip-on shoes that are supportive with rubber soles to minimize the risk of falling. You should not wear open back sandals, flip-flops or heels.
- You can use a long-handled shoehorn to assist with putting on your shoes if needed.
- Wearing a cotton t-shirt or tank top under the vest can help to absorb moisture.

Sleeping

- You can sleep in any position that you find comfortable (including sleeping on your back, on your side, or on your stomach). Some patients find sleeping in a recliner chair the most comfortable for the first month until they become more accustomed to the vest.
- You may sleep with or without a pillow under your head. You can place a small pillow or rolled up towel between your head and the surface of the bed for more support



Getting out of bed

Do not directly sit up from lying on your back. Roll onto your side, swing your legs over the edge of the bed and use your arm and elbow to sit yourself up.



Transportation

- You will not be able to drive while wearing your halo vest because you cannot turn your head to check over your shoulder for blind spots.
- You can ride in a car as a passenger. Avoid twisting and rotating your body when entering or exiting the vehicle. Back into the car seat, buttocks first, and slide back until your head has cleared the entrance.
- If you are driving for a long period of time, it may be helpful to stop and take frequent breaks by walking around for a few minutes.

Walking

- Walking is the only recommended safe exercise while in your halo vest.
- Remember that even walking may be difficult in the beginning while you are getting used to the extra weight of the vest.
- If you feel unsteady on your feet, ask someone to walk with you until you are better able to balance yourself.
- Because you are unable to turn your head, you will lose peripheral vision. You will need to turn your entire body. This is particularly important for safety when crossing the street.
- Do not get discouraged; you will eventually get used to walking with your halo vest!

Reading

- You may find your arms tire quickly from holding up a book to eye level for prolonged periods of time. A bookstand or music stand with prongs to keep the pages open can make reading more comfortable for you.

Using the computer

- Make sure the monitor is at eye level so that you do not have to bend or extend your neck to see the screen.
- It may be helpful to change your position every 30 minutes by taking a break and getting up for a walk.

In case of emergency, i.e. cardiac arrest

- Call 911
- The patient will need to be lying on their back on a flat surface.
- Loosen and release the side waist buckles.
- The front of the vest has a crease built into the shell. Fold the vest at the cardiac crease, exposing the chest.
- Chest compressions (CPR) may now be started.
- The back part of the halo vest is used as a back board for CPR and is not to be removed.
- An Allen key will be taped to the front of the halo vest. Please keep this key taped to the vest at all times. This is for medical professional use only. It would be used to remove the front of the halo vest to access the patient's chest for AED defibrillator use.

Removal of halo vest - Congratulations!

- It is a good idea to wash your hair prior to halo vest removal. You will not be able to wash your hair for 3 days after the halo vest has been removed because the pin sites need to close over.
- The removal of your halo vest will take place in the spine surgeon's office or clinic.
- The removal of the ring is not painful but you may experience a feeling of increased pressure similar to pin tightening when the pins are loosened and removed.
- Adhesive bandages may be used over the pin sites if they are oozing. The pin sites should be left open to air most of the time.
- You can massage the pin sites 2-3 times per day to minimize scarring.
- Daily pin site cleaning will no longer be required.
- The pin site will close over (or scab over) in approximately 24 hours. The scab should fall off within one week.
- A removable neck collar will be fitted. The muscles in your neck have not done any work for several weeks therefore your head may feel heavy. The collar will help support your neck over the next few weeks. You will be given instructions on caring for your collar.
- Your spine surgeon will tell you how long you will need to wear the collar.
- Ask your spine surgeon if you can remove the collar to sleep or have a shower.

