

Living with Your Halo Vest

Information for patients and families

Read this booklet to learn:

- the parts of your halo vest and how to care for it
- how to clean and dress yourself
- how to do everyday activities
- what to expect when it is removed

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A halo vest is a treatment for people who have a broken neck.

You wear the vest so your head and neck won't move. This will help the bones in your neck heal.



Important information:

- Your health care team will check you regularly to decide when they can remove your halo vest. It usually takes about 12 weeks for your neck bones to heal.
- You may need help from family and friends while wearing the halo vest.
- **If you are helping a person in a halo vest, don't hit the metal parts.** Sounds travel easily through the metal to the pins in their skull. The noise moves through their bone to their ear. It's very loud and uncomfortable for the person wearing the vest.
- **It is not legal to drive while wearing a halo vest.**

What are the parts of the halo vest?

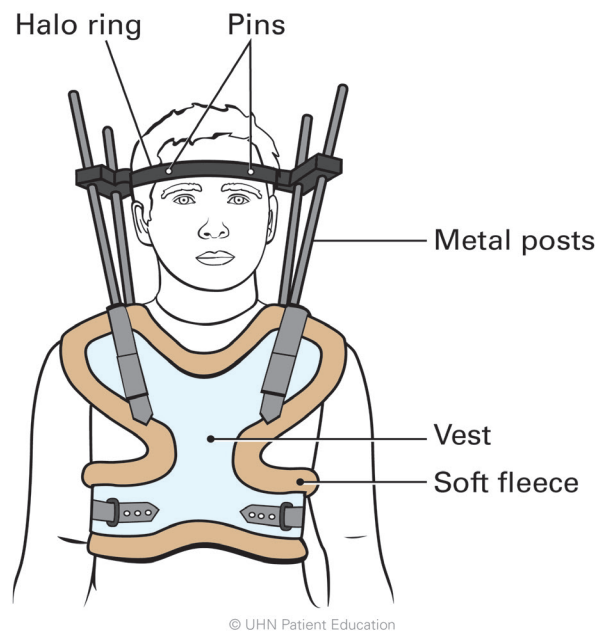
1. A halo ring or crown is attached to your head by 4 pins. One pin is above each eyebrow, and one pin is just behind each ear. The pins go about 1 millimetre into the outer part of your skull.
2. Metal posts attach the halo ring or crown to the halo vest. These posts keep your head and neck from moving.
3. The halo vest is made of a hard plastic shell. The inside is lined with a soft fleecy material.
4. The black halo wrench is taped on the front of the vest. It must only be used during a heart attack to remove the vest and do CPR.



Picture of black halo wrench

The halo vest weighs about 5 to 7 pounds (as much as a small bag of flour). It should fit snugly (you should be able to fit one hand between the vest and your abdomen or belly area). Don't loosen or adjust the halo vest by yourself. Talk to your doctor if you think it needs to be adjusted.

Wearing the halo vest will change your balance until you get used to it.



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How should I care for my halo vest?

- Try to keep the halo vest lining dry. If the halo vest lining gets wet, you can dry it with a hair dryer on a cool setting.
- Always remember that the metal frame (posts or ring) should never be used to turn or lift the person wearing the vest.
- If the halo vest edges press down on your skin in an uncomfortable way, extra liner or foam can be added. Talk to your health care team if you would like them to add more liner or foam to your vest.

How do I care for the areas around the pin sites?

Use a Q-tip or gauze to clean around the pins 2 times a day with mild soap and water. Don't use ointments (such as Polysporin) around the pin sites.

When cleaning around the pins, always check for any problems. Have someone check the pins at the back of your head. Using a small flashlight may help them to see the back pins better.



Call your nurse practitioner, advanced practice nurse or surgeon if:

- your skin around one or more pin sites is red or swollen
- you have a yellowish liquid coming out around the pins
- there is an open area where your skin has pulled away from a pin
- you have pain or tenderness around one or more pin sites
- you hear a clicking noise (only the person wearing the vest will hear it)

These could be signs that a pin is loose. Your health care professional will talk with you about the problem. The pins may need to be tightened.

How do I clean my skin and wash my hair?

Wash your skin every day. It's important to keep your skin and fleece liner as clean as possible. Check your skin (or have your helper check) under the halo vest every day during bathing for sores, blisters or redness. You will need to see your doctor or nurse about any of these problems.

Have someone help you clean your skin. They should do it while you are lying down.

Undoing the halo vest for washing:

1. Ask someone to help you undo the vest one side at a time.
2. Turn onto your side while lying flat on a bed.
3. Undo the bottom buckles and straps on the upper front side of the vest.
4. Protect the liner of the vest with a towel so it doesn't get wet.
5. Wash the skin with mild soap and water and dry very well.
6. Fasten the buckles and straps.
7. Repeat on the other side.

Showering the lower part of your body:

- Ask for help to wash the bottom half of your body.
- In your bathtub, use a bath seat with a back rest and a hand held shower.
- Use a rubber bath mat on the bottom of the tub so you won't slip.
- **Keep the liner of your vest dry.**

Washing your hair:

1. Ask someone to help you shampoo and rinse your hair.
2. Ask the helper to thread a towel through the bars of the brace and tuck it under the vest to keep the liner dry. Or, they can use plastic wrap, a plastic bag, or a plastic poncho.
3. Have the helper use a hand held showerhead or a pitcher of water to wet your hair.
4. They should use a mild shampoo such as baby shampoo. If soap gets around the pins, it won't harm the areas. They can just rinse it off very well and then do pin site care.
5. Towel-dry your hair slightly, and then blow dry it. Hold the blow dryer about 4 to 6 inches from your head. **Be careful:** The posts on the brace may become hot!

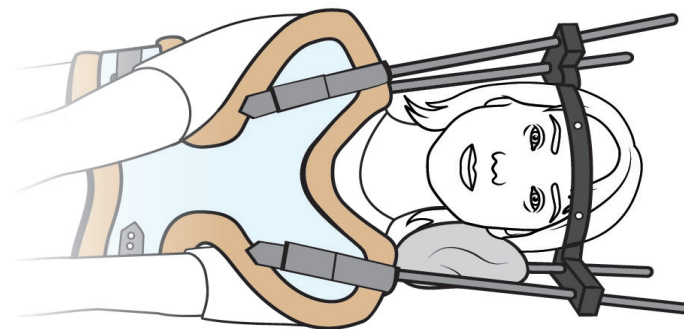
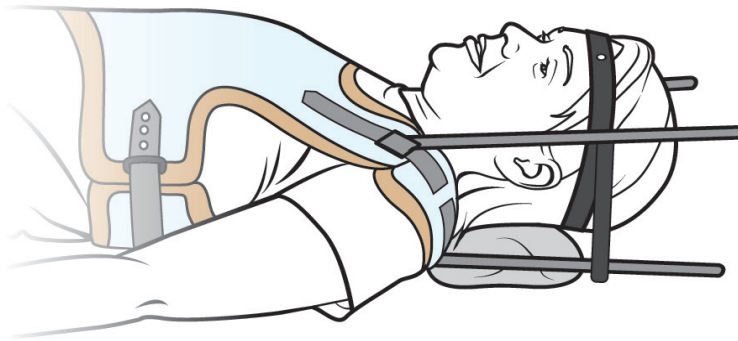
How should I get dressed?

- Only dress while you are sitting. Don't undo the buckles and straps on the halo vest while you are sitting.
- You will need to make some changes to your clothes so they fit better around your vest. For example, making the openings at your neck or waist larger.
- Wear loose fitting clothes over your vest. For example, wear loose sweaters that zip up or button up, sweatshirts with wide neck openings, clothes with a neck drawstring, or V-neck t-shirts.
- Wear a cotton undershirt under the lining of the vest to help soak up any sweat. Women may find it easier to wear a tube top, bikini top with a neck drawstring or a strapless bra.
- Wear slip-on shoes (heels covered but no laces) with good support and rubber soles so you don't fall. Don't wear high heels.
- Use a long-handled shoehorn to put on your shoes if you need to. Don't wear open back shoes or flip-flops.

What do I need to know about doing everyday activities?

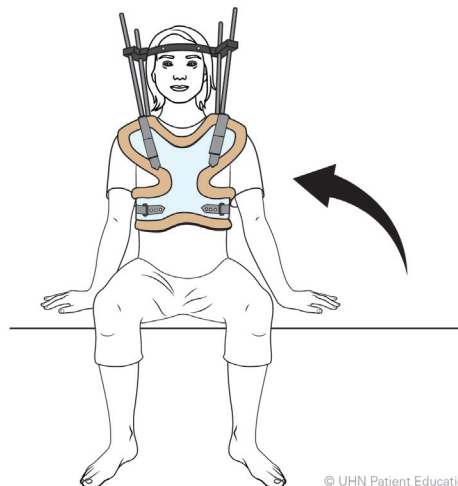
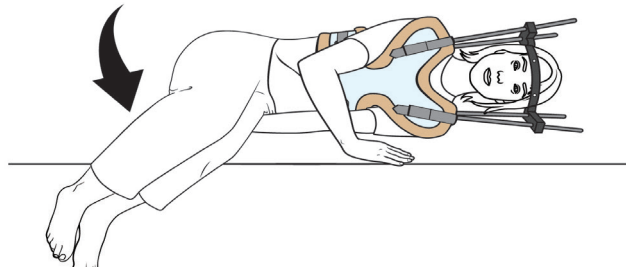
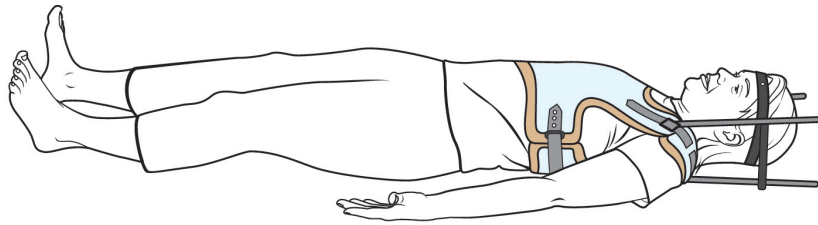
Sleeping

- You can sleep in any position that you find most comfortable. This includes sleeping on your back, your side, or on your stomach. Some people find it comfortable to sleep in a reclining chair for the first month until they are more used to the halo vest.
- If you need more support for your head, you can place a small pillow, rolled up towel, or a piece of foam between your head and the surface of the bed.



Getting out of bed

- Don't try to sit up directly from a lying back position.
- To sit up from lying down follow these steps:
 1. Roll onto your side.
 2. Swing your legs over the edge of the bed.
 3. Use your arms to help you sit up.



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Cleaning

- Your halo vest may change your balance, so avoid bending forward. Don't vacuum or do any heavy house cleaning. These activities can put too much strain on your neck.
- You can do some light dusting of things if they are at your eye level.
- You can sweep the floor if you use small and steady strokes. Have someone else use the dustpan to pick up the waste after you sweep.

Cooking

- Do whatever you can at eye level.
- To make it easier for you when you return home, buy or make frozen meals that you can reheat in the microwave.
- Avoid using the oven. It's better to use the microwave, toaster oven, and stove top for cooking.
- Keep kitchen tools, appliances or other things you use often on the counter at eye level.
- Slide heavier things such as pots and large platters of food along the counter top so you don't have to lift them. A trolley on wheels can also help with moving items around the kitchen.

Washing the dishes

Avoid loading the bottom rack of the dishwasher. Only load the upper rack, or wash your dishes at the sink.

Laundry

- Don't carry heavy loads of laundry (more than 10 pounds or 5 kilograms).
- Avoid bending to use the washer and dryer.
- You can sort and fold laundry or do ironing.

What about other activities?

Traveling

- **It's against the law to drive with a halo vest.** You can't turn your head to check your shoulder for blind spots, so it's not safe to drive.
- You can ride in a car as a passenger. Don't twist your body when you get in or out of a car.
 1. Turn your whole body so your back is to the door opening.
 2. Back into the seat bottom first, and slide back until your head is through the door.
 3. Then use your legs to face yourself forward.
- If you are going on a long road trip, stop and take many breaks. Walk around for a few minutes before continuing.
- If you take public transit (for example train, bus or subway), the sudden movements may be uncomfortable.

Walking

- Walking is the only safe exercise while you are in your halo vest. Even walking may be hard at first as you get used to the extra weight on your head. With time, you will get used to it.
- If you feel unsteady, ask someone to walk with you until your balance is better. Avoid uneven or rocky paths.
- You can't turn your head, so turn your whole body to look when crossing the street.

Grocery shopping

- Don't carry more than a 5 pound bag of groceries in each hand. A bag of milk weighs about 5 pounds and cans of soup weigh about 1 to 2 pounds each.
- Ask for help with heavier bags. You can also ask the cashier to put fewer things in each bag. You may have to make more trips, but you will be carrying less each trip.
- If you don't have help to carry heavy items home, ask the grocery store if they can deliver to your door. There are grocery stores on the Internet that will deliver fresh groceries to your home for a reasonable price.

Reading

- At first, your vision may be blurry, and your eye muscles may get tired more quickly. This is normal as you get used to the halo vest. It usually goes away with time.
- Your arms may get tired quickly from holding a book at eye level for a long time. A bookstand with prongs to keep the pages open can make reading easier for you.

Using the computer

- Make sure the monitor is at eye level so you don't have to bend or extend your neck to see the screen.
- Take a break and go for a short walk every 30 minutes to change position.

Having sex

- You can be sexually intimate as long as you don't bend, twist or lift.
- You may find it more comfortable to try different positions.
- The person with the halo vest should be on top.

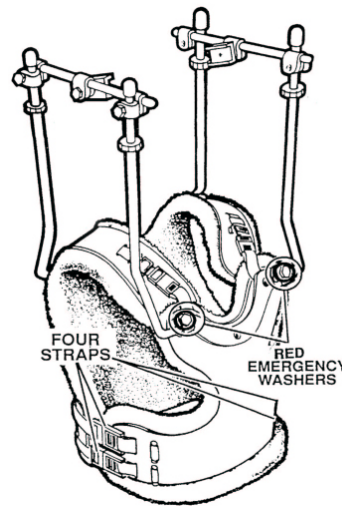
Drinking alcohol

Avoid drinking alcohol. Alcohol can cause you to lose your balance, which could increase your risk of falling.



If you need to do CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) on a person in a halo vest, call 911 and then:

1. Lay the person on the back part of the halo vest. You will need to remove the front part of the halo vest to do CPR.
2. Using the black halo wrench provided, loosen the two bolts through the emergency washers on the front of the halo vest.
3. Undo the side straps and turn the front part of the halo vest to show their sternum (chest bone).
4. Keep the back part of the halo vest where it is. Start CPR and continue until medical help arrives.



As long as the patient's body weight stays on the back part of the vest, the back posts attached to it will help keep their spine stable.

What can I expect when it's time to remove the halo vest?

Your halo vest may be removed after about 12 weeks. This may seem like a long time, but it takes time for your body to heal. You will have CT scans or x-rays before your halo vest is removed to make sure that your bone has healed properly.

Here is what you can expect:

- Wash your hair before your appointment because you won't be able to wash your hair for 2 days after your halo vest is removed. You will need to keep your pin sites dry so they can start to scab (heal).
- Removing the ring is not painful. But, you may feel pressure when your health care team loosens the pins.
- Put bandages over the pin holes if fluid is coming out. If there's no fluid, leave them open to the air.
- Massage the pin sites with gauze 2 to 3 times every day to decrease scarring.
- Once the scabs fall off, you can put lotions or oils on the pin sites if you want. This may help to reduce scarring.
- Your health care team will fit you with a removable neck collar and give you instructions for how to use it. Your health care provider will let you know how long to wear the neck collar.
- Your head will feel heavy and wobbly because the muscles in your neck have not done any work for many weeks. The neck collar will help support your neck over the next few weeks.
- You may start physiotherapy when you don't need to wear the neck collar anymore. Your health care provider will let you know.



