
When your child needs a wheelchair to help them move, an occupational therapist (OT) or physical therapist (PT) can help. They can help choose a wheelchair that fits your child based on their height, weight and positioning needs.

Your child's wheelchair may be a:

- Rental chair, or
- Custom wheelchair to help meet your child's special needs for positioning and mobility

It is very important to know how to use the wheelchair correctly in order to safely move your child:

- In and out of the wheelchair.
- From one place to another in the wheelchair.

What do I need to know about my child's wheelchair?

If your child has a custom wheelchair, check the owner's manual for specific information. Many wheelchairs have these features:

- 2 wheel locks with handles near each wheel. When locked, they prevent the chair from moving. Do not apply wheel locks while the wheelchair is moving.
- A seatbelt to help keep your child in place and prevent them from falling out of the chair.
- 1 or 2 footrests to support your child's feet.
- A cushion to help increase comfort, improve posture and protect the skin over the sitting bones.
- Other types of support to position and keep your child in place, such as lateral trunk supports. Lateral trunk supports may or may not swing out of the way. They help keep your child upright and straight in the chair.

Your child's wheelchair may have other features to meet your child's needs. It may tilt, or it may be a power wheelchair.

To help keep the wheelchair in good condition:

- Know the vendor name and phone number. Most often, this is on a sticker on your child's wheelchair.
- Make sure your child's chair has routine care to help keep it in good repair and prevent accidents.
- Call the vendor at least every 4 to 6 months to see if the wheelchair needs any repairs or if your child has grown.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Wheelchair safety, continued

How do I prepare for a safe transfer?

Your child's therapist can teach you how to safely transfer your child. Some guidelines include:

- Put the wheelchair close to your child. Place the chair so that it makes it easy for you to pivot or rotate your child into the chair. Be sure the area is clear, safe and free from clutter.
- Lock the wheel locks on the wheelchair.
- If your child is in a hospital bed, make sure the bed brake is locked.
- Remove the footrests from the wheelchair or swing them fully away.
- Remove or flip up the armrest. Do this on at least 1 side closest to the bed or surface where you are moving your child.
- Unbuckle the seatbelt.
- Make sure the cushion is secure and in the right place.
- Think about a plan for how you will move your child. Have an extra person nearby if needed.
- It is best to use a gait belt for extra safety. This is a special belt that goes around your child's waist.
- Ask for help if your child has lines or tubes connected to them or if your child is too big for you to safely lift by yourself.

How do I transfer my child safely?

Your child's doctor will give you specific instructions about how much your child can help with the transfer. This may depend on how much weight your child can put on their arms or legs.

Your therapist can teach you how to move your child safely with or without special equipment. Some guidelines include:

- Have your child move to the edge of the bed or chair. Get as close to them as possible. If your child can help you with the transfer, remind them what you need them to do.
- Place 1 of your feet and that knee between your child's legs. Or, stand so that your toes are up against your child's toes (toe to toe).
- Bend at your hips and knees. Keep your back straight.
- Lift your child by holding them at their waist or crossed arms. Do not pull on their arms or have them reach around your neck to help. Your therapist may also give you a gait belt to use.
- Lift your child all the way before turning. Do not twist your body while lifting.
- Use slow, controlled movements.
- Be prepared to lift your child fully in case they cannot help you. If you need help to safely transfer your child, have an extra person nearby. Tell them what you need them to do ahead of time.

Once your child is in the wheelchair, make sure they are as safe as possible:

- Make sure they sit up straight with their bottom as far back in the seat as possible.
- Buckle the seatbelt. Make sure it fits snugly at their hips to help prevent them from sliding.
- Attach and secure any straps, headrests, armrests and footrests that help hold them in place.

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Wheelchair safety, continued

- Place their things in a bag on the back of the chair. Avoid placing too many things in their lap.
- Make sure to keep breathing equipment that may be needed in the area. This is so you can get to it quickly in case of emergency.
- If your child has a weaker side, it may be easier for them to help if you move them towards the stronger side.

Other tips include:

- Help your child change their position at least every 30 minutes to make sure they do not have any pressure areas and their skin stays protected. You may use a timer to help with this.
- Put your hand on their chest when going downhill. You can also wheel the chair down the hill backwards if the hill is steep.
- Make sure tip bars are in place to prevent the wheelchair from tipping backwards. This is important when going up a hill or curb.
- Plan where you are going ahead of time when possible. Use ramps if available.

If your child is in the hospital and you have questions, call the Rehabilitation (Rehab) department at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at this phone number: _____.

If your child is no longer in the hospital and you have questions, call the:

- Wheelchair vendor, or
- Children's Seating and Mobility Clinic. The team can check your child's mobility and positioning equipment needs. Call 404-785-3718 to schedule a visit.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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