

About Sunny Hill

Sunny Hill Health Centre for Children is a provincial facility offering specialized services to children with disabilities, their families and communities throughout British Columbia. Using a family-centred approach, Sunny Hill helps promote the healthy development of children and youth by supporting families and community service providers in their efforts. It is also a resource for educational services and information about disabilities. Services are delivered close to home in a child's community, or on site at Sunny Hill, located in Vancouver.

How To Contact Us

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*Promoting Better Health for Children with Disabilities
through Clinical Services, Education and Research*



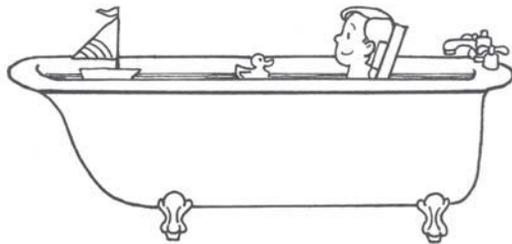
Introduction:

Does your child have a neuromotor disability such as cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, myelomeningocele, brain injury, muscular dystrophy or any other disability that prevents or limits their ability to control their muscles and feel sensations? There are some things you can do to help your child's skin stay healthy!

Why Should I Pay Extra Attention To My Child's Skin?

People with neuromotor disabilities may be at greater risk of serious skin **damage**. This is a problem because healthy, whole skin is important for keeping infection and germs out of our bodies.

Damage to the skin can happen for many reasons; but whatever the cause, when skin breakdown happens to your child, it is a **serious issue** that requires your attention; especially if it occurs in a place which is in contact with your child's equipment and is not easy to see in places such as the lower back, bum, tailbone, hips, thighs, back of the head, elbows, and ankles....



What Does Skin Damage Look Like?

- Sometimes skin damage starts out as a **red/purple spot on fair skin** or a **purple/blue spot on dark skin**, which does not fade within 20 minutes.
- When you press on this spot with your fingers it does not become lighter, and it may **feel warmer or cooler** than the skin around it.
- The spot may feel **hard or squishy** under your fingers, and may look swollen.
- If your child has feeling or sensation, it may feel **painful or itchy**.

At first the spot may not look like much because the skin is not broken or open, but it can get a lot worse. Without proper attention and care, the spot can turn into an open sore and the sore can get bigger and move deep into skin, muscle and even bones. You may hear these types of problems called: '**decubitus ulcers**'. There are different levels of seriousness of ulcers. If they are really bad, they can require surgery and this means your child is limited in his or her activities during recovery. It can also leave a weak spot on the skin that could become a problem again in the future.

Aside from a spot on the skin, damage can also look like a scrape or cut or sore. It is important to **make sure we get control of skin problems before they get bad or prevent them from happening at all**.



Why Is My Child's Skin More Prone To Damage?

- Because of your child's disability, they **cannot move their bodies** into a variety of positions as easily as other children. This means **pressure** is placed on certain parts of the body for longer periods of time. Pressure can **limit blood flow** and the blood is what brings food to your body and takes away the waste. Without blood flow, your tissues can start to die.
- Your child's limited ability for movement can also mean they generally have **less blood flow or circulation** throughout their bodies. Think about when you are cold and your hands and toes get white; if you walk, jump or move around, it gets the blood flowing and they get nice and pink! Children with disabilities have less ability to move and get their blood flowing, so their skin is at greater risk and may not heal as quickly.
- Sometimes children do have the ability to move on their own or can move in a limited way. When children **move or are moved** (transfers, changes in position, etc), they can sometimes get **rubbing or friction** on certain body parts. When this happens over and over, it can lead to skin breakdown.
- Sometimes children have **limited or no ability to feel different sensations** on their skin: If they have been sitting one way too long, have a sore or a cut, or have a spot that is rubbing, they may not notice it. This lack of feeling can mean that the sore spot goes unnoticed and becomes worse.



- Sometimes children with neuromotor disabilities are **thinner** than is typical **because they do not take in enough food or do not eat the full range of foods needed for a balanced diet**. This may be for a number of reasons, but sometimes they have more trouble eating because the muscle control and sensation in their mouths/throats can also be impacted by their disability. When children are thin, their bones stick out and there is not a lot of muscle and fat under the skin for padding. These **boney areas are in greater danger of skin breakdown**, and unfortunately, these spots are usually in the places that are in contact with their wheelchairs, beds, standing frames.
- Sometimes children have **limited or no bowel and bladder control or they sweat a lot**. This can mean that feces, urine and/or sweat come in contact with their skin on a regular basis. **Moisture** on the skin can cause the skin to be weak and more sensitive to rubbing or friction. Think of what your skin looks like when you've been in the bath too long!
- Finally, having equipment against your skin for long periods of time can cause the **temperature** of your skin to go up! When our body temperature goes up, we use the food from our blood more quickly (i.e. higher metabolic rate). If the blood is not able to flow well (because of pressure or circulation), then the area may start to suffer. This is why a sore can become a problem more quickly in our kids.



How Can I Help My Child Keep His Or Her Skin Healthy?

Children with neuromotor disabilities generally have fewer problems with their skin than older persons. They weigh less when younger, and may have more 'baby fat'. But it is very important to get into good habits and routines for skin health early in life and stick with the pattern...

- Inspect your child's skin frequently, especially in places where bones stick out (lower back, tailbone, bum, heels, hips, elbows, back of the head, elbows)
- If you notice red marks on fair skin or purple/blue marks on dark skin that do not disappear within 20 minutes, try to locate the source of the problem. Is the equipment too tight? Is your child not positioned correctly in the equipment? Is she rubbing against something when transferring? Avoid the source of the problem i.e. use another position and contact your therapist to have the equipment adjusted. Remember...it's important to catch these things early.
- Children grow rapidly, so it is important to work with your therapist to ensure that their equipment grows with them...equipment that fits well is much less likely to cause pressure points.
- When you dress your child, make sure there are no bum pockets on jeans or pants. Ensure that clothing is smoothed down under their bottoms or behind their backs so they don't get pressure points from bunched fabric.



- Skin needs to be clean, so regular bathing is important. Also make sure your child's skin is dried thoroughly before dressing so there is no moisture against the skin. As well, change your child's pants as soon as possible after soiling to avoid having urine and feces in contact with the skin. Pads that wick-away moisture may be an option...



- Make sure your child gets lots of fluids and especially water!
- It is important that children with neuromotor disabilities are well nourished (calories and protein). This not only improves their skin, but is also important for general development of their brains and bodies. If your child is underweight, or struggles to get enough food in at mealtimes, it is really important to chat with your doctor or other health professionals about feeding. Here are some signs of feeding difficulty or poor nutrition to watch for:
 - Eating very slowly or inefficiently
 - Not chewing their food well
 - Losing a lot of food from their mouths
 - Coughing, choking, sounding gargly or wheezy with meals
 - Frequent respiratory infections
 - Low body weight and minimal fat (skinny appearance)
 - Lethargy or tiredness

Improving your child's general nutrition will help with many aspects of health...it will make them more resistant to skin breakdown, but also more likely to heal and fight off infection if it occurs.



- Make sure your child gets the **right kinds of food**. This means a balanced diet with servings from all of the four food groups. For healthy skin, it is especially important to get enough:
 - Omega 3 - fish (salmon, mackerel...), flaxseed
 - Vitamin C- citrus, strawberries, broccoli
 - Vitamin A- Vegetables that are dark green or dark orange
 - Zinc-seafood, meat, eggs
 - Protein- meat or alternatives (this is important for repairing damaged tissues)

If you are concerned that your child does not get enough of these foods, you can speak with a dietitian or doctor. You can also try the following on-line resource for more information:
<http://www.dialadietitian.org/>



- **Avoid a lot of rubbing** of the skin, especially over those boney areas already discussed. This is especially important during times when you are moving, transferring or washing your child, but also, it is best to **avoid massaging over boney areas**.
- **Re-position your child frequently** (at least every 2 hours) or if possible teach them to move themselves every 15 minutes so they do not have pressure on particular body parts for long periods of time. Talk to your therapist about how often to reposition, and alternate ways of positioning your child.
- Use **positioning equipment in the way it was recommended** and ensure that your child is **positioned correctly within the equipment** . For example, in wheelchairs, make sure the bum is all the way back in the chair and straps are done up correctly.
- If your child has had problems with skin breakdown in the past, or will be immobilized (i.e. not moving) for a period of time because of surgery, illness or injury, ensure that you mention this to your therapist. **There is equipment available which is helpful for reducing pressure and rubbing or friction.**
- Use **pillows or wedges of foam** when child is in bed to avoid contact of boney areas such as knees and ankles.
- **Avoid donut type cushions** as these increase pressure in other areas.



When Do I Contact A Health Professional?

If your child experiences skin damage as described on page 2.
i.e. red marks that do not fade after 20 minutes or open sores, try to locate and remove the source of the problem and talk to a health professional to ensure the problem is dealt with without delay.

