

# Alveolar Bone Graft: Care After Surgery

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## What is an alveolar bone graft?

An alveolar bone graft is a surgery to fill a gap in the bone of the upper jaw.

Some children with cleft lip or cleft palate also have a cleft in the bone of the upper jaw that holds the teeth. This bone is called the alveolus (al-vee-OH-liss).

To fill this gap, a small amount of bone is taken from another part of the body, usually the hip bone. After surgery, the new bone in the upper jaw will become hard and strong. The bone that was taken from the hip will grow back. This happens within about 6 weeks.

## How is the surgery done?

The gum tissue is opened to show the gap in the bone. Then, the bone is taken from inside the hip bone and put into the gap. The gum tissue is put back over the bone, and then stitched closed. The cut in the hip is also stitched closed.

## What can I expect after surgery?

After the surgery, your child will feel sleepy for several hours. There will be a bandage or tape (Steri-Strips) on your child's hip. Your child's face may be swollen. Your child will have an IV line for fluids and medicines.

During the surgery, your child's surgeon or anesthesiologist will put numbing medicine in the area to prevent pain. After this wears off, your child's hip will be sore. Effective pain control will help your child feel better and heal faster. Please read the pain section of this handout to learn more.

## How will my child eat?

**Your child should not eat anything hard or crunchy for 6 weeks. Avoid chips, crackers, popcorn, cookies, and raw fruits or vegetables.**

After surgery, your child can begin drinking clear liquids. Later, they can start to eat soft foods. It is important right after the surgery for your child not to eat anything that needs to be chewed. The bone in the jaw is soft at first, and it needs to heal before biting down on food.

Soft foods that you can give your child while they heal:

- Creamy foods like yogurt, hot cereal, mashed potatoes, soup, milkshakes or smoothies
- Anything that can be squished easily between the fingers, like well-cooked fruits and vegetables, soft ground meats or fish, pasta or mashed beans

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### To Learn More

- Craniofacial  
206-987-1117
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [seattlechildrens.org/patient-education](https://seattlechildrens.org/patient-education)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



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### Will my child have pain after surgery?

Your child will likely feel pain in their hip and mouth after surgery. We partner with you and your child to prevent and relieve pain as completely as possible. You know your child best. No matter the level of your child's pain, believe they are hurting and respond right away. In addition to medicine prescribed for pain, you can also help your child cope by distracting them with music, games, TV or videos.

Your child's healthcare provider will order a pain medicine that your child can take by mouth at home. This medicine works best if your child takes it at the same time each day for the first 1 to 2 days after surgery. This works much better than waiting to see if your child is in pain.

The pain will get better over time, usually in a few days for most children. Even after the pain gets better, your child might still have a sore hip when they walk. This may last for a few weeks. When your child's pain gets better, you can stop giving your child the prescription medicine that your child's healthcare provider ordered, and continue giving your child Tylenol (acetaminophen) and/or Motrin (ibuprofen) as needed. This is described in our handout "Pain Medicine After Outpatient Surgery." Use this medicine only if recommended by your child's healthcare provider. Check with the healthcare provider first before giving any type of medicine to your child.

Many prescription pain medicines can make it hard for your child to have a bowel movement. This will be less of a problem if your child drinks plenty of water and 100% fruit juice (no sugar added). Medicines called "stool softeners" may also help. Ask your child's healthcare provider if your child needs this.

For more information, read the Seattle Children's handouts:

"Acute Pain" [seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE503.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE503.pdf)

"Constipation after Surgery" [seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE432.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE432.pdf)

"Tylenol Dosing Chart" [seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1305.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1305.pdf)

"Pain Medicine After Surgery" [seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1251.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1251.pdf)

To keep your family safe, store medicines inside a locked cabinet or location where others cannot easily get to them. Once your child has recovered from surgery, dispose of all unused medicines. Taking leftover pain or other medicines, on purpose or by accident, can be very dangerous.

For more information about safe disposal of unused medications including pain medications, read our handout "How to Get Rid of Unused Prescription Medicines" at [seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE784.pdf](https://seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE784.pdf) or visit [takebackyourmeds.org](https://takebackyourmeds.org) to find a take back place near you.

### How do I care for the surgical area?

#### Mouth

- Your child should swish and spit every time they eat. Use the special mouthwash 2 times a day and warm salt water solution at all other meals and snacks.
- Salt water solution recipe: Mix 1/2 teaspoon table salt into 8 ounces of warm water.
- You can never rinse too much – if you aren't sure, rinse again!
- Gently irrigate sutures with warm salt water to dislodge debris. Only brush the sutures if there is food stuck and you cannot dislodge it with irrigation.
- Starting 2 days after surgery, your child should start gently brushing their teeth 2 times a day with a soft bristle toothbrush (do not use an electric tooth brush). If it is painful to brush on the tooth surface that faces the surgical site, your child can take a break from brushing there, as long as they can rinse the area clean. Your child should start brushing again when they feel comfortable.
- Watch your child or brush your child's teeth for them for the first few weeks after surgery. Switch to an over-the-counter mouthwash after 2 weeks.

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#### Hip

- **It is okay to shower 1 to 2 days after the surgery.**
- **No soaking in the bathtub for 2 weeks.**
- **The hip area should be gently washed with soap and water. Pat to dry.**

If your child has a bandage that your surgeon has asked you to keep dry, sponge baths are easiest.

Most children will have small pieces of tape, called Steri-Strips, glued over the surgical site. It is OK to get these wet. The Steri-Strips can be left in place until they fall off.

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#### What about activity after surgery?

**Your child may not take part in sports, gym (physical education/PE) class, very active play or swim for at least six weeks after surgery.**

After surgery, it is a good idea for your child to walk a few times every day. Standing up without help may be uncomfortable at first, but it will help your child's hip to heal faster.

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#### When do we return to clinic?

Your child should come for an appointment 1 to 3 weeks after surgery.

### When should I call the craniofacial center?

Call us if:

- Your child has a temperature higher than 101.5° F or 38.5° C
- The surgical site on your child's hip or in their mouth gets redder or more swollen, or starts draining yellowish or greenish fluid (pus)
- Your child has drainage from their nose or mouth, or a bad smell from their mouth
- Your child injures their hip or mouth
- Your child has pain not controlled by the medicine prescribed

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### What if I have other questions or concerns?

If you are calling Monday to Friday 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., call the Craniofacial Nurses at 206-987-1117.

If you are calling during evenings or on the weekend, call the Paging Operator at 206-987-2000, tell them the name of your surgeon and ask for the person on call.

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