

SPECIALIZED RESOURCES:

Supporting Children Through a Port Access

By: Nicolle Bengtson, CCLS

As a child life specialist who has worked in a cancer center for over a decade, I have been able to witness the resilience of patients and their families going through one of the hardest times of their lives. I have provided support to families during the initial diagnosis all the way through the end of therapy. Throughout their treatment process, the patient will have to endure a number of difficult medical procedures, countless visits to the hospital, sedation, taking harsh medications/ treatments, and many physical changes within their bodies.

What is port access?

At Texas Children's Hospital and other institutions, many children being treated for cancer will get a port-a-catheter surgically placed. This device is placed under the skin and is accessed with a needle at each visit. This allows patients to receive their treatment in a quick, safe, and efficient way. A large portion of my role as a child life specialist in the cancer center is providing education, preparation and support to patients for their frequent port accesses.

Once a child has a port-a-catheter placed, each time they come to the hospital for treatment they will have their port accessed. The procedure is sterile, so everyone in the room will have to wear a mask. The patient will need to remove their shirt or wear a shirt where the chest is exposed so the port site is easily accessible.

Once the patient and family are situated the nurse will begin the cleaning process. Once

the port site is cleaned and dry the port will be accessed with a needle. There are often options to help with needle pain which may include lidocaine cream or numbing freeze spray. After the needle is inserted into the port-a-catheter, the site will be covered and dressed with a bandage to keep the area clean and sterile. The nurse then can collect bloodwork from the port and is ready for the patient to receive treatment.



Tips for Supporting a Patient During Their Port Access:

- Set-up the room for success
- Develop a coping plan with patient
- Provide medical play preparation before or after procedure
- Advocate for comfort positioning or desired position
- Provide distraction/support during procedure
- Provide procedure narration throughout
- Assisting patient in returning to baseline
- Post procedure education
- Develop a follow-up plan for future visits

Explaining a port-a-catheter to patients and their families

When educating a patient and their family, I use the Medikin port doll to explain the port as I feel like it gives a very realistic visual in a non-threatening way. It is a great resource for patients of all ages. It can be utilized during a medical play session to let the patient explore the port and real medical supplies that will be used during their port access. For the preschool and school-aged patients I like to engage the patients in medical play utilizing real medical supplies to allow them to feel more comfortable with their port and the port access process.

When preparing a patient or their family, I often start by explaining that a port-a-catheter placement is a surgery where a small circle device is placed under the skin. When providing the patient with preparation, I use the following script: "This is a surgery where the doctors will give your body something that will help you through your cancer journey. It is a quick surgery where you will be asleep the entire time. The port is very helpful to have because it allows the doctors to give you

medicines in a fast and safe way. It is different than an IV because you can get stronger medicines without having to feel or taste them and it can be used for a longer period of time. After the port surgery you may feel sore for a week or two, but the soreness will slowly go away. Once your port site has healed you can do everything you did before having a port including swimming or taking a shower. When you leave the hospital, your port will be de-accessed and then re-accessed each time you return. You will keep the port placed until you are finished with your treatment."

Another resource I have found to be helpful for all ages is to provide patients with a port shirt. This can help alleviate the stress of removing their shirt and promotes privacy.

As a child life specialist, I have found that utilizing the resources around me can be one of the biggest tools to helping families cope with what they are going through. Getting a port-a-catheter placed is often one of the first moments that makes their cancer journey feel real. I feel so lucky to be able to work with these patients and families and get to share some of the amazing resources that are available.

Port Shirt Resources:

- Comfy Cozy: comfycozys.com
- Zip with Us: [Zip With Us](http://ZipWithUs)
- Luke's Fastbreak: LUKE'S FASTBREAKS - #BeStrong #NoMoreHospitalGowns (lukesfastbreaks.org)

Education and Preparation Resources:

- Medkin--port doll: Neuro-Oncology • Oncology-Hematology | MediKins by Legacy Products (legacyproductsinc.com)
- Kelsey's Dream: Hopper the cancer crusher: Hopper | Kelsey'sDream (kelseysdream.org)
- Aflac ducks: My Duck - The Aflac Childhood Cancer Campaign™
- Gabe's Chemo Duck: My Duck - The Aflac Childhood Cancer Campaign™
- Shadow buddies: Oncology Port-A-Cath Buddy — SHADOW BUDDIES
- American Childhood Cancer Organization: Cozy Cat and Medical Kit: Cozy Cat Stuffed Animal - ACCO

