

Understanding Restraint Use for Patients and Essential Care Partners

Understanding Restraint Use for Patients and Essential Care Partners

What is a restraint?

- A restraint is anything that is used to control behaviour or limit a person's freedom of movement.
- If restraints are used appropriately, they can help lower your risk of getting hurt or hurting others, including the people caring for you.
- There are many types of restraints. These include:
 - › A physical device (like bed rails, lap belts, mitts, wrist restraints, and ankle restraints)
 - › Physically holding the person
 - › Medication to calm the person (for example, if a person is confused and may hurt others)
 - › Using safer areas or rooms that give people space to calm down

Why are restraints used?

- Sometimes people are alert and OK at home, but get confused when they get sick and are in the hospital. This change may be caused by:
 - › Illness
 - › Surgery
 - › Being in a new place
 - › A change in their daily routine or sleep patterns
 - › Medication
- Sometimes a restraint is used so that a person **does not**:
 - › Pull out a breathing tube
 - › Remove a catheter or an I.V. tube
 - › Harm other people
- **Nova Scotia Health policy states restraints are to be used only as a last resort.**
- If a person has a high risk of being restrained, the health care team will make a care plan to try to avoid using a restraint. This may happen if you or your loved one is:
 - › Experiencing delirium (confusion that is new or happened quickly)
 - › Withdrawing from medication or alcohol
 - › Pulling at lines or tubes needed for care

- Nova Scotia Health's goal is to promote the health and well-being of all our patients. We try to help you keep as much comfort, independence, and quality of life as possible.

Our goals are:

- To support you so that you can get well and to support staff so that they can work.
- To help you get stronger and more independent. This helps you get better faster.
- To involve you and your loved ones in planning your care and in making decisions about the use of restraints.
- To make sure you understand that:
 - › You have the right to informed consent (the health care team must clearly explain the risks and benefits of restraints).
 - › **You can say no to the use of restraints unless there is a serious risk of you hurting yourself or others.**
 - › **A restraint should only be used when other ways to lower risk of injury have not worked, while keeping your wishes and values in mind.** Your health care team will talk about this with you.
 - › **You have a right to prioritize autonomy and independence over safety.**
 - › If a restraint is needed, it will be used for as short a time as possible.

What are the risks of restraints?

There is a higher risk of injury and distress when a restraint is used. This is why we use the least restraint possible and remove restraints as soon as we can.

Possible risks of restraint use include:

- › **Deconditioning** (getting weaker), falls, and injury
- › Constipation (you cannot poop) and incontinence (do not have bladder control)
- › Pressure injuries (bedsores), infection
- › Pain
- › Discomfort
- › Fear
- › Anger
- › Confusion and more **responsive behaviours** (actions, words, or gestures used to respond to something negative, frustrating, or confusing).
- › Social isolation and withdrawal

Ways to help without using a restraint

- Your health care team has many ways to help without using a restraint.
- They may also ask you and your essential care partners for ideas.

- **Your health care team may try to avoid using a restraint by:**
 - › Having a support person at your bedside
 - › Using a calm approach when they are talking with or caring for you
 - › Helping you keep a regular routine
 - › Helping you exercise or walk more
 - › Making sure you are as comfortable as possible
 - › Making sure you are not in pain
 - › Reviewing your medications to lower the risk of confusion as a side effect
 - › Using reminders (like calendars, pictures, or location signs) that tell you where you are
 - › Supporting you to maintain independence

How can my essential care partners help?

- It can be calming for people who are restless or confused to have a familiar person or a comfort object (like a favourite blanket, pictures or keepsakes) nearby. This may help them feel safe and recover faster.
- You can help the health care team understand your loved one. This can help us to connect with them and meet their needs.

- You may be asked to fill out a form to tell us about:

- › Their interests and what they like
- › What they **do not** like
- › Their life history

We encourage you to share any information that may help.

Things to remember

- We will **always use the least restraint possible**.
When a restraint is used, nursing staff will keep checking to see if the restraint is still needed. They will stop using it or change it to a less restrictive (limiting) device as soon as possible.
- **Before we use a restraint, we will:**
 - › Find out why it is needed.
 - › Change your care plan to help lower the need for a restraint.
 - › Work with your health care team to find other ways to help.
 - › Involve you and your essential care partners in the care plan.
- **Once a restraint is used, we will:**
 - › Use the least restraint possible.
 - › Watch you closely.
 - › Communicate with you and your loved ones regularly.
 - › Stop using the restraint as soon as possible.
 - › Keep giving you the care you need.

Questions?

- If you are not happy with how you or your loved one is being restrained, talk with someone on the health care team. Please ask questions and share your concerns. We are here to help you.

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Prepared by: IPPL Least Restraint Working Group
Designed and Managed by: Library Services

WT85-0599 © November 2025 Nova Scotia Health Authority
To be reviewed November 2028 or sooner, if needed.
Learn more: <https://library.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources>