

Rock on: He played guitar while getting his brain tumor removed

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Professional guitarist Christian Nolen took his stage show to an operating room last month, strumming out Deftones tunes for surgeons as they worked to remove a tumor from his brain.

Nolen's performance wasn't just for entertainment—his [guitar](#) playing

helped guide the [brain](#) surgeons during the delicate operation.

By playing the guitar during an "awake" portion of his two-hour surgery in December, Nolen allowed doctors to protect his [manual dexterity](#) while scooping out as much tumor as possible.

The [surgical team](#) was removing a tumor called a glioma in the right frontal lobe of Nolen's brain, near the area that controls left-handed movement, said Dr. Ricardo Komotar, the brain and tumor neurosurgeon who led the team at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center in Miami.

"Our plan going into the surgery was that he would be awake and playing the guitar while we were taking out the tumor," Komotar said in a news release. "We'd be examining him to be sure we weren't injuring the part that controls hand movement, and the testing of hand movement would be done by him playing the guitar."

It's not often that brain surgeons use a skill like guitar playing as a test during an operation, but these sorts of awake surgeries occur several times a week at his [cancer center](#), he said.

The patient is initially put to sleep, and regional anesthesia numbs the scalp for the invasive part of the operation, said Dr. Arman Dagal, chief of neuro anesthesiology and perioperative neurosciences at the center.

Nolen was placed in a proper position for the neurosurgeon to access the area where the tumor was located and then wakened when the operation reached a delicate stage that could have harmed his motor skills.

"When we're ready, in the critical portion of the surgery when we need them to communicate with us, we wake the patient up and take out the breathing tube. They slowly get oriented to where they are," Dagal said in a news release.

That's when Nolen was given a guitar and asked to play. He chose the Deftones songs for his playlist.

In addition to helping neurosurgeons limit harm while removing a [tumor](#), awake brain surgery provides other patient benefits, the doctors said.

"It's shown to improve outcomes in terms of lower complication rates. Also, patients stay in the hospital a shorter period of time, requiring less-invasive postoperative monitoring because when they go to the ICU, they're fully awake, and we can communicate with them," Dagal said. "These are all benefits from having less anesthetic and being awake. There's less chance of nausea and vomiting and greater early mobilization."

Nolen continues to undergo [cancer treatment](#), but he has resumed playing the guitar for fun, doctors said.

More information: The Mayo Clinic has more about [awake brain surgery](#).

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