

Houston doctors say Giffords can attend launch

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This undated file photo provided by the office of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, shows her, left, with her husband, NASA astronaut Mark Kelly. Looking back on the horror of Saturday, Jan. 8, 2011, this seems miraculous today: that Kelly would indeed command the next-to-last space shuttle flight and that his wounded wife would be in Florida watching. Yet that is what is expected to happen Friday, April 29, 2011 provided doctors approve her travel. The Kelly-Giffords ordeal has been a national drama since the congresswoman was shot in the head at a meet-and-greet in her hometown of Tucson, Ariz. (AP Photo/Office of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, File)

(AP) -- Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords is set to reach an important milestone this week when she ventures from her Houston rehabilitation hospital for the first time to watch her astronaut husband rocket into space history.

Giffords and her doctors set the Cape Canaveral, Fla., trip as a goal early on in her rehabilitation. It was the hope of her husband, Mark Kelly, too as he trained to lead NASA's next-to-last space shuttle flight.

On Monday, doctors at TIRR Memorial Hermann hospital confirmed the congresswoman will fly to Florida to watch Kelly command the [space shuttle Endeavour](#) when it makes its final flight to the [International Space Station](#).

The doctors said Giffords is "medically able" to travel and that they view the trip as part of her rehabilitation from a Jan. 8 gunshot wound to the head. The congresswoman was wounded in a mass shooting that killed six people in Tucson, Ariz.

It seems an extraordinary accomplishment now, that she would be able to attend the [liftoff](#) and that Kelly would feel comfortable leaving her side to fly into space. The launch is set Friday afternoon, and President [Barack Obama](#) and his wife and two daughters will be there too. However, it's unclear whether they'll sit with Giffords.

Kelly reported his wife said "awesome" and fist-pumped when doctors told her she could attend the launch, according to a transcript of an interview with CBS's Katie Couric that will be broadcast Monday on the Evening News.

For brain injured patients like Giffords, goals and outings are key to rehab. Setting goals helps patients work toward something tangible, doctors say, while trips and outings can be used to reintroduce them to the community and see how they interact in different situations.

"We routinely allow patients outside visits as part of their rehabilitation," said Dr. Gerard Francisco, lead physician of the [brain injury](#) rehabilitation team and chief medical officer at TIRR. Francisco also is

chairman of the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston Medical School.

Attending the launch is an "opportune time" for Giffords to continue her therapy progression, he added in a statement.

It's unclear whether doctors from the Texas hospital will travel with Giffords to Florida. The last time the congresswoman flew was when she was transported on a private jet to Houston from the hospital in Tucson, Ariz., that treated her immediately after the shooting.

This time, however, her flight is not an ambulance transport and the trip will be considered another part of the intensive rehabilitation she has been undergoing since arriving in Houston in late January.

Giffords spokesman C.J. Karamargin said the congresswoman's Florida trip is "great news."

"Attending the launch is something the congresswoman has been working toward and something that's important for her, her family and her staff," Karamargin said. "It's another significant milestone in her recovery."

ABC and CBS News initially reported on Sunday that doctors had given Giffords the green light to attend the launch.

The launch is scheduled for Friday at 3:47 p.m. Eastern. Kelly and his crew have been in quarantine - to prevent them from getting sick before or during the mission - since Friday and will be arriving in [Cape Canaveral](#) on Tuesday.

Kelly told Couric days ago when the interview was taped that he and his

wife were a team in a Scrabble game - and won. It was the most recent glimpse into Giffords' progress, which has been tightly guarded by her family and the hospital.

Kelly said Giffords is writing with her left hand because her right side is still impaired, and she requires assistance to walk.

She still speaks slowly and it takes her time to formulate thoughts and words, but he said improvement can be seen every few days or each week.

"When I get back . in a few weeks . she's going to be noticeably different than when I left. I mean I know that's the case. So it's exciting to see the improvement, day to day and week to week. It's really exciting," Kelly told Couric.

Shortly after the launch, Giffords will return to Houston, though the hospital said details about her travel arrangements will not be released.

While she is in Florida, "provisions have been made with NASA" regarding her care, the hospital said. It remains unclear whether there will be updates on her arrival in Florida or her return to Houston.

Families view launches at Kennedy Space Center from a restricted area, and there are no plans for Giffords to make a public appearance.

NASA for the past few weeks has had launch management officials scouting locations and working with Giffords' staff on "whatever particular needs she would require," Kennedy Space Center spokesman Allard Beutel said. He referred to the congresswoman's staff for details on her requirements and schedule.

But, he said, this is different from NASA's normal accommodations for

astronauts' families, which usually watch lift-offs from the launch control center's roof - an area accessible only by stairs, Beutel said.

"I don't think we've ever had this kind of situation where this level of injury occurred so close to a launch," Beutel said Monday.

Giffords went to Kelly's last launch in 2008, when he commanded the space shuttle Discovery. The two married in 2007.

Giffords was shot while at a meet-and-greet with constituents in the parking lot of a Tucson, Ariz., shopping center. A gunman killed six people and wounded 13 others, including Giffords.

Jared Lee Loughner, 22, has pleaded not guilty to charges stemming from the attack and is in custody.

Giffords has not been seen publicly since the shooting and has spent the past three months relearning how to speak, walk and take care of herself. She has been singing - as part of musical therapy - asking for her favorite foods and visiting with family, friends and her rabbi.

Kelly returned to training for the shuttle launch in February after taking time off to be at his wife's hospital bedside.

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