

# After You Leave the Hospital

## Taking Care of Yourself after Your Spinal Surgery

### Call your doctor if

- You have a temperature of 100.5°F or above, or if you have a fever and chills.
- You have redness, swelling, drainage, new tenderness or warmth around the incision. (Slight swelling along on the incision line is normal.)
- You have increased back pain, not controlled by pain medications.

### Temperature

Check your temperature if you feel warm.

### Breathing

Use your incentive spirometer (IS) at home every 2 to 3 hours, and cough for at least the first week to help prevent pneumonia.

### Incision Care

You can take a shower but do not soak or let water pound on the wound. Dry the wound gently. The tapes (steri-strips) across the incision may be

removed 2 weeks after surgery if they have not already fallen off. Don't use any lotions or creams on your incision until it is completely healed.

### Pain Relief

Take pain pills as prescribed to control pain. Ice packs can help reduce pain and swelling.

### Diet

What you eat after surgery is important and can help you heal. A healthy weight means less stress on your back.

- Eat a diet high in iron to help replace blood cells that were lost during surgery and to prevent anemia.
- Many narcotics and other pain medications can cause constipation. A high fiber diet high can help. Eat 20 to 35 grams of dietary fiber a day. Drinking plenty of water will also help.
- Avoid excess alcohol consumption. Pain medication and muscle relaxants may make you sleepy. Alcohol can make this worse.

### Preventing Blood Clots

If you are wearing support stockings, continue to wear them at home to promote blood flow and prevent blood clots. You may be put on special medications to help prevent blood clots.

### About Narcotic Pain Medications:

Narcotics can cause an upset stomach and constipation. Make sure to drink plenty of water with them, which will help decrease sour stomach and constipation. Eating with your pain medication or having even a small snack can help reduce getting an upset stomach.

Do not drive or use power tools while taking narcotics or any other sedating medication that can reduce your reaction time.

Do not drink alcohol with narcotic pain medications, which can increase the effects.

### **Bathing and hygiene**

You can get up to the bathroom for toileting. Do not take tub baths, or go in any swimming pools until your doctor gives you permission.

### **Protect your back**

Keep good posture, use your supports and remember the precautions you were taught in the hospital (i.e. log-rolling). Poor posture can cause pain and stiffness. Follow your doctor's instructions about wearing a brace.

### **Swelling**

You can have swelling along the incision after surgery. This may increase after exercise. You can use ice packs for 20 minutes every hour as needed to reduce swelling.

### **Exercise**

Continue your home exercise program.

### **Get your sleep**

Get enough deep and continuous sleep. It may help to save the medications that make you sleepy to take at night. Try to limit the amount of caffeine you drink in the afternoon and evening.

### **Intimacy**

Holding hands, hugging, touching and kissing are all ways to show caring. It is best to wait 4 to 6 weeks after surgery before engaging in sexual intercourse. Please talk with your doctor and ask when it is safe to take part in sexual activity. After your surgery, you may be more comfortable lying on your back. You can:

- Talk to your partner about your concerns, and what is comfortable.
- Be creative. Explore new things. Keep a sense of humor. Know that there may be some awkwardness in finding new, comfortable positions.
- You will be able to be more active in sexual activity as your back heals over several months.

### **Emotions**

What happens in our bodies can affect our emotions. You may find that your diagnosis, surgery and recovery may set off certain emotions. It is common to feel anxious, angry, guilty, sad or fearful. You can also feel tired and frustrated with the speed of your recovery. It helps to talk with someone who can help you and help loved ones who don't seem to understand. If you feel anxious or depressed beyond your ability to cope, call your doctor. There are many kinds of resources and treatments available to help you.

# Nutrition

---

You might find that you are not very hungry after surgery. The surgery itself, pain medications, lack of regular exercise, and/or constipation often cause a lack of appetite or nausea. Have 5 to 6 smaller meals more frequently if you don't feel like eating. Your body needs nutrition to heal from surgery.

Some guidelines to enhance your healing and health:

- Eat a wide **variety** of nutritious foods daily. Remember, even simple, small changes can make a big difference in living a better life. Select foods from all the basic food groups:
  - Whole grains.
  - Fruits and vegetables.
  - Milk and dairy.
  - Meat and meat substitutes.
- You need to eat **protein** to help your wounds heal:
  - Eat 3 to 5 servings of meat, fish, poultry, eggs, dairy, soy or beans each day.
- You need **calcium** to help your bones to repair themselves:
  - Eat 3 to 5 servings of calcium-rich foods every day.
- You need **fiber** to help decrease the risk of constipation caused by pain medications and iron supplements.
- You need **iron** to help replace blood cells lost during surgery:
  - Have at least 1 ounce of meat, fish or poultry at each meal.
  - Iron supplements can cause constipation, so you may need a stool softener.
  - Vitamin C can help your body absorb iron.
  - Make sure your doctor knows you are taking an iron supplement.