

Caring For Yourself After Spinal Surgery

What is the Main Problem?

You have just had spinal surgery. To make sure you get better at home you need to know how to care for yourself.

These guidelines give you information on caring for yourself after your procedure. Your doctor may also give you more specific instructions. Call your doctor if you have any problems or questions.

What to Expect After the Procedure:

It is common to have the following feelings:

- Pain or numbness around the incision area.
- The incision may itch as it heals.

What You Need to Know to Care for Yourself at Home:

Incision care:

- Check the incision and the area around it twice a day. Use a mirror or have a family member look at your incision if it is in a place where it is hard to see.
- Look for redness and swelling. Also, look for anything leaking from around your wound.
- If you have stitches or staples, they will be removed about 2 weeks after surgery. Please call for an appointment if you don't have one.

Dressing care:

- Remove your bandages 48 hours after surgery or as directed. Leave incision open to air if there is no drainage.
- You may shower after the bandage is removed or as directed. Avoid bathtubs, swimming pools, and hot tubs for 6 weeks.

Pain:

- Most people will have some pain.
- Take only the pain medicine prescribed by your doctor. Take it only as instructed. Do not take over-the-counter pain medicine unless directed.
- Icing the incision can help ease pain. You may use ice in a plastic bag or ice packs. These should be wrapped in a towel or pillow case to avoid direct contact with your skin. The ice packs may be applied for 20 minutes at a time every hour as needed.

Diet:

- To help with healing and prevent constipation, eat a well-balanced diet high in protein and fiber. Drink 6-8 cups of healthy liquids each day.
- Take an over-the-counter stool softener while you are taking narcotic pain medications to help prevent constipation.

Activity:

- Walking is encouraged. This can help prevent pneumonia, blood clots, constipation and stiffness.
- You may go up and down stairs as tolerated.
- Do not lift anything heavier than 10 pounds until your doctor says it is safe. Avoid bending or twisting at the waist. Always bend with your knees. Try not to pull on things.
- Avoid sitting for long periods of time. Limit sitting to 45-60 minutes at a time. You should lie down or walk in between sitting periods. When lying down, change positions at least every hour. You may sit or lie in a recliner chair.
- Do less activity if you have discomfort.
- You may tire easily. If you are tired, you should rest. Resting helps healing.
- Follow your doctor's instructions related to activities, exercises, and physical therapy. Ask your doctor what kinds of exercise you should do. Ask when you should begin doing these exercises. For more information please refer to the *Guide to Spine Surgery* booklet.

Safety:

- Do not drive for at least 2 weeks after surgery. Do not drive if you are taking narcotic pain medicines. After 2 weeks, you may drive short distances.
- You may ride in a car for 20-30 minute trips. Lying back in the passenger seat may be more comfortable for you.
- If you have been prescribed medicine to prevent your blood from clotting, follow the directions carefully.

Call your doctor if:

- Your pain suddenly becomes much worse.
- Your incision area is red, swollen, bleeding, or leaking fluid or pus.
- Your legs or feet become increasingly painful, numb, weak, or swollen.
- You have a fever of greater than 100.5 degrees
- You develop a rash.
- You develop any reaction or side effects to medicines.
- You cannot urinate when you feel like you need to go.
- You have trouble controlling urination or bowel movements.
- You have not had a bowel movement in 2 days and have stomach pain, bloating, and nausea or vomiting.
- You have any questions or concerns.

Call 911 if:

- You develop weakness or cannot use your legs.
- You have chest pain.
- You develop dizzy spells or fainting while standing.
- You develop shortness of breath or have trouble breathing.

Why Are These Home Care Instructions Important to You?

To recover fully, you must take good care of yourself and stay safe.