

Chapter 6: Returning to Your Normal Activities

Diet and Maintaining a Healthy Weight

There are many benefits to maintaining a healthy weight. Being a healthy weight helps to control your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose levels.

The body mass index (BMI) is a measure of body fat based on height and weight. The results tell if you are underweight, normal weight, overweight or obese.

According to the National Institutes of Health, BMI ranges are:

- underweight: less than 18.5
- normal: 18.5 -24.9
- overweight: 25-29.9
- obese: 30 and higher.

How to maintain a healthy weight:

- Eat well balanced meals and snacks that are low in fat, cholesterol and added sugar.
- If you have diabetes, continue to follow your diabetes diet.
- Avoid foods that are high in calories.
- Eat only when you are hungry, not out of habit.
- Exercise every day.

Exercise

Exercise can help with healing and help you to feel better. After surgery you should start exercising slowly, even if you exercised before surgery.

Do not lift more than 10 pounds for first 6-8 weeks. You may slowly begin to lift more weight after 8 weeks.

Exercise guidelines:

- Walking is great low-impact exercise.
- Try to get 30 minutes of aerobic exercise every day. Aerobic exercise, such as walking and bicycling, will:
 - lower your heart's workload by decreasing your heart rate and blood pressure
 - increase your metabolism of fats and lower your blood lipids (cholesterol)

- improve your blood circulation
- lift your spirits
- keep your weight down
- help you handle stress.
- If getting 30 minutes of exercise is difficult because of limits (such as time or arthritis), split up the 30 minutes into 10 or 15 minutes a time. It still counts!
- Put ice on painful joints or warmth on painful muscles before and after you walk. Stretching is a good idea, too.
- Avoid any type of exercise that could cause trauma to your new kidney, such as contact sports.
- If you are thinking about running, talk with your nephrologist first. Although running is excellent exercise, it can be stressful on your bones. (A side effect of taking prednisone is bone loss.)

Driving

- You will not be able to drive for several weeks after surgery.
- You cannot drive while you are taking an opioid (narcotic) pain medication.
- Your nephrologist will let you know when it is OK to drive again.

Primary Care Provider

Your primary care provider (PCP) will continue to be an important part of your health care team. See your PCP for:

- routine visits and physical exams
- cancer screenings
- vaccinations
- any health care concerns you may have that are not related to your kidney transplant.

If you do not already have a PCP, it is recommended that you make an appointment to establish care with a provider. If you have questions about how to find a PCP, ask your transplant coordinator.

Dental Care

Taking care of your teeth is important. The anti-rejection medications can have side effects that affect your dental health.

It is important that you visit your dentist and dental hygienist as recommended for regular checkups and cleanings.

The most common dental problems after a transplant are:

- gum disease
- tooth decay
- mouth ulcers
- dry mouth
- infections.

You do not need to take an antibiotic before your dental appointment because of your kidney transplant. Follow routine guidelines for preventive antibiotics. Call the Kidney Transplant Clinic if you or your dentist have questions.

If you have dentures, have your mouth checked by a dentist at least once a year. The dentist should make sure the dentures fit properly and check your mouth for cancer.

What to do if you do not have insurance

Talk with your social worker if you do not have dental insurance. You may be able to get an appointment at a low-cost dental clinic through a dental school or at a community health clinic.

Eye Care

Eye exams are important to check your vision and health of your eyes. Talk with your eye doctor about how often you should have eye exams.

If you have diabetes, you should have one dilated eye exam at least once a year. A dilated eye exam is done by an eye doctor (ophthalmologist). Eye drops are placed in your eyes to make the pupil large so the doctor can see inside your eyes.

A dilated eye exam can find serious problems such as glaucoma, cataracts, diabetes, infection, and cancer. Talk with your eye doctor if you have questions about your eye exams.

Immunizations (Vaccinations)

It is important to stay up-to-date on vaccinations. Check with your primary care provider or pharmacist if you have vaccinations that need to be updated.

Here are routine guidelines for some common vaccinations:

- influenza: every fall
- Td or Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis): every 10 years
- Pneumovax® (pneumonia): every 5 years
- Prevnar® (pneumonia): one time
- Shingrix® (shingles): one time series of 2 shots
- hepatitis B: series often given before transplant. Check with your nephrologist or transplant coordinator to see if you need this series.

Check with your nephrologist before getting a vaccination. While some (like the ones listed above) are safe to get after a transplant, others may not be if they contain a live virus.

Sun Precautions

There is an increased risk of skin cancer in all transplant recipients. If found and treated early, many skin cancers can be treated successfully. For this reason, it is important for you to do the following:

- See a dermatologist at least once a year. If you do not have a dermatologist, talk to your transplant coordinator who can help you find one.
- Do regular skin checks as recommended by your dermatologist.
- If you see any changes in skin or new skin growths, check with your dermatologist or PCP right away. The sooner a skin cancer is found, the better the chance of successful treatment.
- Limit the amount of time you spend in the sun.
- Wear broad spectrum sunscreen with SPF of at least 30 all year.
 - Apply it to all skin that will be exposed to sun.
 - Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going out during the day and reapply it every 2 hours and after swimming or sweating.
- Wear protective clothing including hats, whenever possible.
- Avoid being in the sun between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.
- **Do not sun bathe or use tanning beds.**

Alcohol

It is best to avoid alcohol because it may affect the way your body absorbs tacrolimus. An occasional alcoholic drink is OK but it is recommended that you limit how much alcohol you drink.

Illegal Drugs

Illegal drugs (such as cocaine, crack, heroin, marijuana, ecstasy) are harmful. They are especially harmful to a person who has had a kidney transplant.

Marijuana is known to carry a fungus that causes aspergillosis, an infection that can lead to:

- fever
- cough or wheezing
- coughing up blood or mucus
- worsening asthma
- death (severe cases).

Talk with your transplant coordinator, doctor, counselor or other health care provider if you have had or currently have drug addiction. You may benefit from counseling, support programs or both.

Tobacco Use

Avoid all tobacco use. Smoking can:

- damage blood vessels, including those that supply blood to the new kidney
- cause heart disease, stroke and cancers
- increase your heart rate, blood pressure and workload of your heart
- increase your risk of osteoporosis
- delay your healing from surgery.
- Smokeless tobacco and e-cigarette products are not safe alternatives to smoking.

Talk with your nephrologist or transplant coordinator if you need help quitting tobacco. (See page 80 for resources.)

Returning to Work or School

Your recovery and the type of work you do will determine when you can return to work. Ask your nephrologist when you can go back to work or school.

In general, you should be able to return to work or school in about 6 to 8 weeks. You may be able to return sooner if your job doesn't involve a lot of physical activity. You may need more time to recover if you have a job that involves physical activity.

If you received disability benefits for kidney failure before transplant surgery, you will not be able to receive those benefits now with a working kidney.

If you received disability based on other health issues, you may still be eligible to receive those benefits. Talk with the financial specialist, social worker or human resources representative at your company if you have questions.

Sexuality

You should feel better and have more energy after surgery. You can continue sexual activity once your incision is healed and you feel comfortable.

Menstrual cycles for women may return to normal within a few months to one year after transplant. Men may notice improvements in erections in a few months after transplant.

Pregnancy

It is possible to have children after a kidney transplant.

Women

- Wait at least 1 year after a transplant before trying to become pregnant. Talk with your nephrologist before becoming pregnant so that your medications can be adjusted.
 - **Some medications can harm an unborn child. Mycophenolate (CellCept®) can cause major birth defects. Do not become pregnant while taking CellCept or for several months after stopping due to the risk to the unborn child.**
- If you think you are pregnant, call your PCP right away so you can get a pregnancy test. If the test is positive, call the Transplant Clinic right away to see if any medications need to be changed.

- If you don't want to become pregnant, see your OB/GYN for birth control options. Call the Transplant Clinic before you start taking any medications.

Men

- You should talk to your nephrologist before fathering a child.

Travel

If you are planning to travel, talk with your nephrologist before you make your arrangements. Follow these general guidelines.

- Avoid major travel for the first few months after surgery.
- Always keep extra doses of your medication with you when you travel in case you are delayed or miss a plane, train or bus.
- Keep your pharmacy's phone number with you.
- Never pack your medications in your luggage. Always carry them with you so they do not get lost or exposed to temperatures that are too hot or too cold.
- Many pharmacies can ship your medications if you are away from home for a long time. Check with your pharmacy before you leave.

If you travel to another country, follow these guidelines:

- Check to see if you need any vaccinations (shots) for the country you will be visiting. Your doctor can tell if all of your vaccinations are up to date.
 - Check with your insurance provider to see if a visit to a travel clinic is covered. The travel clinic can review your vaccinations and recommend any that may be needed.
Remember: you can't get any live vaccinations.
- Carry a letter from your doctor about your medications in case you have any problem with customs when traveling overseas. You may be able to fill your prescription in a pharmacy at your travel destination. Check with your insurance provider before you leave.
- Call for refills at least 1 week before you travel to allow for refill authorizations if needed.
- Keep your medications in a carry-on bag. Should there be flight delays or if your luggage is lost, you will still have your medications.
- When you are traveling, make sure the water you drink is properly treated and all food is properly cooked.
- Consider wearing a medical alert bracelet or necklace.

Drinking Water

- Drinking treated city tap water after a kidney transplant is safe.
- Consider using bottled water for drinking if you have well water.
- Call your local health department for advice on how to have your well water tested.
 - If you drink well water, use a 1 micron filter.

Handling Food

- **Important:** Safe food handling is important. You are at a higher risk of getting a food-borne illness because your immune system can't fight infection as well.
 - Avoid raw or undercooked meat, fish (sushi, oysters), poultry or eggs.
 - Check "sell by" dates on meats, fish and dairy products.
 - Avoid eating from salad bars or buffets. There could be issues of possible contamination or unsafe temperatures.
 - Avoid foods from street vendors.
- When preparing food, use these guidelines:
 - Thoroughly cook raw meat (beef, pork or poultry).
 - Wash raw vegetables well before eating.
 - Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods. (Keep them separated in your grocery cart, too.)
 - Do not eat or cook with unpasteurized milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk.
 - Wash your hands, knives, cutting boards and any surface that may have come in contact with uncooked food before working with a different food item.
 - Never thaw foods at room temperature.
 - Refrigerate foods quickly.
 - Plan shopping trips so you can refrigerate foods within at least 2 hours of purchase.

Handling Pets

Pets are an important part of family life. Animals can help relieve stress and may improve a person's quality of life. Follow these guidelines if you have pets to lower your risk of getting an infection from your pet:

- Wash your hands after petting or playing with your pet, especially before you eat or handle food.
- Make sure your pet gets regular health checkups and required vaccinations.
- Do not let your pet lick your face.
- Avoid cleaning fish tanks. If you must, wear disposable gloves.
- Avoid stray or sick animals.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers the following pets high-risk and should be avoided:
 - reptiles (including lizards, snakes and turtles)
 - baby chicks and ducklings
 - exotic animals.
- Do not change a cat litter box. If this is not possible, wear gloves and a face mask, and clean the box every day. Wash your hands well after changing the litter box. (The same applies to birds and pet turtles.)
- If you are bitten by an animal, call your PCP right away.

Gardening

When working outdoors, use these guidelines:

- Talk with your nephrologist before you begin gardening to see if it's OK for you to work in your garden.
- Wear gloves when you handle soil. This will keep you from coming in contact with droppings from cats, birds or other animals.
- You may be advised to wear a mask.
- Avoid working with compost piles, wet leaves and rotting organic matter. They may contain mold, which can increase your risk for respiratory infections.
- Wash your hands well after working in the garden.

Mental Health

The transplant process can be a positive and rewarding experience, but it can also be overwhelming. You have new medications, home tests, Kidney Transplant Clinic visits, side effects, and other changes.

Don't be afraid to talk to family members, friends or members of the transplant team about your feelings, problems, concerns or questions.

Ask your social worker or transplant coordinator for more information if you or family members need to speak with a mental health provider.