

Care After Spine Surgery

How Long Will Recovery Take?

It may take several months for your symptoms to get better or go away after spine surgery. Be patient. Give your body time to heal. Here are some things to know as you recover.

Dressings and Bandages

Follow these guidelines for changing dressings:

- Keep your incision clean and dry.
- Change dressing daily. Use light gauze and tape, until you no longer have drainage from your incision.
- Change your dressing after showering or if it gets wet.
- Once drainage stops you can leave your incision uncovered.

Bathing

Take showers, not baths, after surgery. You can take a tub bath when your incision is completely healed.

When you shower:

- keep your incision covered while showering until your surgeon says you can uncover it.
- when you can shower with your incision uncovered, pat dry your incision.

Caring for Your Incision

How you care for your incision will depend on the type of closure used by your surgeon:

- **staples.** Staples will be removed 2 to 3 weeks after surgery at your follow-up visit.
- **stitches and sterile tape.** Do not pull off tape. Tape strips will fall off within 2 to 3 weeks. When tape falls off it does not need to be replaced.
- **dissolving sutures and surgical glue.** You do not need to cover your incision.

Exercise and Movement

Refer to “Understanding Your Spine Surgery” book for more details on exercise and moving during your recovery.

Your surgeon will let you know if you need a brace.

Keep these tips in mind:

- Avoid bending, twisting and lifting more than 5 pounds. This includes household chores such as sweeping and vacuuming. If you do need to bend and lift:
- Bend with your knees and keep your back straight.
- Use a “reacher” to pick up items from the floor.
- **Carrying.** Carry items close to your body at waist level.

(over)

- **Walk.** Start by walking a short distance. Slowly increase how far you walk each day. If you become sore or have pain, decrease the length of your walks for 1 to 2 days. Fatigue is a sign you should rest.
- **Sitting.** Practice good posture. Increase the length of time you sit each day.
- **Sex.** You may resume sexual activities as your pain and symptoms get better.

How to Manage Constipation

- Taking prescription pain medicine, anesthesia and decreased physical activity all can slow your digestion and cause constipation.
- Tell your health care provider if you have constipation. Check “Understanding Your Spine Surgery,” book for tips to manage constipation.

Pain Management

You will have pain after surgery. Together, you and your health care team will create a pain plan that is right for you. The plan will include:

- a “pain goal”. This is the amount of acceptable pain you can handle.
- balancing your pain so you are able to do your physical therapy and activities of daily living.

Read chapter 3 in “Understanding Your Spine Surgery,” book for tips to manage your pain.

Driving

- Do not drive if you are taking pain medicine.

Call Your Care Team

Contact your care team if you have:

- a temperature of 101 F or higher
- yellow or green drainage or significant blood draining from your incision
- redness, swelling or warmth by your incision
- new or unusual pain, numbness, or tingling
- pain you cannot control or questions about your pain medicine plan
- bowel or bladder changes
- an opening in your incision
- pain in your calf or pressure in your legs
- been sent home after surgery with a drain
- any other questions or concerns.

Call an Ambulance

Call 911 if you have chest pain, feel short of breath or have difficulty breathing.