

AFTER SPINE SURGERY RECOVERY

After your surgery is complete, you will be taken to the post-anesthesia care unit (PACU) known as the recovery room to awaken from your anesthesia. This usually takes an hour or so. From there, you will either return home or be moved to the surgical floor. This is where you will start the healing and recovery process.

Hospital Recovery

Once you reach the surgical floor, there are several goals you must meet prior to discharge home. The first goal is adequate pain control. This will be achieved through a series of steps from IV pain medication, possible epidural medications and finally you will need to have adequate pain control with oral pain medications. The second goal is mobility. Physical therapy and occupational therapy will be in to see you daily. You will need to be comfortable with walking, climbing stairs, and getting in and out of bed. The final goal is making sure your gastrointestinal and urinary systems are working appropriately. This means that you must be able to eat a solid meal without difficulty, urinate without difficulty, and have adequate bowel activity.

Immediate Post Operative Expectations

Pain

It is normal to have pain after the operation, especially in the incision area. This does not mean that the procedure was unsuccessful or that your recovery will be slow. Pain in the spine or extremities is also not unusual. This is likely caused by an inflammatory/swelling response following surgery. Medication will be given to control pain. The medications

may be provided to you by an epidural catheter, intravenously (IV) or orally. The epidural and IV pain medications will be controlled by button that you can press every couple of minutes. The patient controlled analgesia (PCA) button does have a limit of medication that you can provide to yourself thereby preventing overdosing of medication. The anesthesia team manages this service and will see you daily for assessment. Other means of pain control could include IV or oral muscle relaxers, sleep aids, or anti-inflammatories.

Ice will help initially and we recommend having ice packs for after surgery available to use over the incisions or areas of pain. Ice packs will be available for you in the hospital to use. Moist heat in later stages of recovery may be helpful and frequent repositioning may also be of benefit.

Nerve Function

The onset of nerve recovery will start immediately after the nerve is decompressed. However, nerves heal at a slow rate. Although most notice an immediate difference in their nerve symptoms, results can vary. This does not mean the surgery was unsuccessful. Nerves heal at approximately one millimeter per day or an inch a month. Immediately after surgery you may notice resolution of pain, followed by improvements in numbness and tingling which could take weeks to months to resolve or improve. Strength is typically the last function of the nerves to return and this will likely require some physical therapy post operatively.

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Physical Activity

Immediately after surgery, you may move about in bed and rest in any comfortable position but avoiding stomach sleeping. You may begin to walk the same day of surgery, but most are very tired due to the anesthesia and will begin walking the next day with physical therapy. The ability to get out of bed and walk can vary with each surgery. Our specific instructions will be provided to you by your nurse or doctor while in the hospital. Our goal is to get you up and walk as soon as possible after your surgery. The easiest way for you to get out of bed is with a log rolling maneuver. This is accomplished by rolling onto your side, then dropping your legs over the side of the bed followed by using your elbows to push yourself up to a seated position. You will be taught how to do this properly with the physical therapist while in the hospital.

Gradually increase the amount of walking you do each day. Since it may be painful at first, try making short trips. Begin with a trip to the bathroom, then to the door, and later out into the corridor. We recommend ten small walks per day. Sitting and standing are also recommended at a gradual pace. If discomfort occurs, change positions frequently.

Hygiene

For the first three days following your surgery, your incision is to remain dry. You should avoid showering, for three days following surgery. While in the hospital, your dressings will be changed daily by either the nurse or physician assistant caring for you. Sponge baths are allowed in the first three days but getting the incision wet should be avoided.

Nutrition

Immediately after surgery it is likely that you will not be hungry and will avoid eating. Intravenous (IV) fluids will be ordered during the early recovery period and continued until you can tolerate regular liquids without nausea or vomiting. Your diet will then be adjusted back to solid foods as your appetite and gastrointestinal functions return. It is important to understand that your body needs roughly double the number of calories as it did prior to surgery. We encourage consuming small, balanced meals at least four times a day. Nutrition and calorie intake is important after surgery, not only to provide energy but to promote healing.

Gastrointestinal and Urinary System

Constipation commonly occurs after surgery. This is due to general anesthesia, lack of activity and use of narcotic pain medication. Constipation will be treated with stool softeners such as Colace or laxatives such as Dulcolax or Milk of Magnesia. A diet of whole grain cereals, fruits, and fruit juices (prune juice) will also help. If constipation becomes too severe, suppositories and enemas may be recommended. Once discharged from the hospital, we do recommend continuing stool softeners or laxatives at home because pain medications will still likely be needed and can be constipating.

Emotional Changes

It is normal to feel discouraged and tired for several days after surgery. These feelings may be your body's natural reaction to the circulation of extra hormones necessary to handle the stress of surgery. Although emotional let-down is not uncommon, it must not be allowed to get in the way of the positive attitude essential to your recovery and return to normal activity.

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Discharge from the Hospital

The hospital stay will be determined by your progress as well as your pain control and help available to you at home. Most patients are discharged home as long as there is adequate help provided. There are some occasions in which patients are discharged to a short term rehabilitation center. This decision is made with you and your family's wishes in mind with the help of a social worker at the hospital.

Healing and Recovery

Healing is the body's natural process of restoring its damaged tissues to a normal or near normal state. Although healing may be improved by general good health, proper nutrition, rest, and physical fitness, it will occur without your having to work at it. Recovery is the process during which you work to become well. It requires a gradual but persistent effort to increase physical strengths and minimize weakness. You must concentrate on what is improving, rather than on what symptoms remain.