

Post-Op Instructions: Taking care of yourself after surgery

You have just had major surgery. While you are at home, please follow these instructions to guide your care and recovery. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact NIH or your local doctor.

Important Dates and Numbers

Your return appointment is in the _____ floor clinic (ACRF _____) on _____ at _____ a.m./p.m.

Clinic (ACRF _____) hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
The clinic phone number is _____

If the clinic is closed or you need to speak to your doctor on the weekends or holidays, then call _____ to reach the _____ nurses' station.

In emergencies only:

Call the page operator at 301-496-1211 to page the _____ fellow on call. Make sure to tell the operator if you are calling long-distance.

Care of your incision

- ▶ Wash your hands before and after touching your incision(s). Handwashing is the best way to prevent infection.
- ▶ Watch your incision every day for any separation, bleeding, or signs of infection. Signs of infection may include redness, tenderness, swelling, drainage, unusual odor, or if the area feels warmer than the rest of your body. You may also have a fever, which is usually a temperature of 101 °F or higher. Check your temperature as needed. If any of these signs are present, contact your doctor.
- ▶ It is normal to have some numbness around the incision for some time after surgery. This may subside as the incision heals.
- ▶ If you have been sent home with staples in your incision, then see your regular doctor within _____ days to have your staples removed. You may shower with staples in place unless your doctor has told you not to.
- ▶ If you have been sent home with “steri-strips” over your incision, you may shower, but be gentle around the steri-strips. Use regular soap and water. Wash your incision gently, then pat your steri-strips dry.
- ▶ Do not pull, tug, or rub the steri-strips. If they have not fallen off 2 weeks after surgery, then you may peel them off gently.

- ▶ Check with your doctor about applying creams or lotions to your incisions. Apply these only after the steri-strips have fallen off or have been removed.
- ▶ Avoid exposing your incision to the sun. This can cause the incision to become red. Scars turn white over time without exposure to the sun.

Activity

- ▶ Follow the specific activity instructions given by your doctor. Different surgeries require different limitations on activity. Generally, you should not lift objects heavier than 10 pounds for 6 to 8 weeks. Lifting heavy objects too soon may weaken your incision. Your doctor will tell you specific activity instructions for your type of surgery.
- ▶ Check with your doctor about when you will be able to drive. Usually, you will not be able to drive for 6 to 8 weeks after surgery. However, this can vary depending on the type of surgery you have had. Never drive while taking narcotic pain medications.
- Plan your daily activity so that you can rest often. Do not expect your energy level to be the same as it was before surgery. Your body needs more energy to heal. This may cause you to feel weak or need to take naps.

Diet

- ▶ Resume your regular diet when you return home, unless your doctor has put you on a special diet. You may not feel like eating regular portions right away. It is normal to have less of an appetite after surgery. This could return to normal when your activity level increases. In the beginning, try eating small meals several times a day.
- ▶ Choose high protein foods to help your body heal. These may include such foods as chicken, beef, cheese, tofu, milk shakes, and ice cream.
- ▶ Drink lots of fluids and include fiber in your diet, such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grain cereals or breads. Eating these foods and drinking lots of fluids help to prevent constipation. They also promote normal bowel function, especially if you are taking narcotic pain medication.
- ▶ Take nausea medication as needed if it has been ordered by your doctor. Let your doctor know if you have nausea or vomiting that lasts longer than 24 hours. If you have had neurosurgery, follow your doctor's specific instructions about reporting nausea.

Pain medication

- ▶ Take your pain medication as ordered by your doctor. Take as needed for pain relief. Do not take pain medication more often than it has been ordered by your doctor unless this has been approved.

- ▶ Follow the dietary instructions given in this information to prevent constipation. Narcotic pain medication can slow your intestines. If stool moves too slowly through your intestine, you may become constipated. Drinking fluids and eating fiber can help prevent constipation.
- ▶ Report any new, increasing, or unrelied pain to your doctor.

This information is prepared specifically for persons taking part in clinical research at the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center and may not apply to patients elsewhere. If you have questions about the information presented here, talk to a member of your health care team.

Products/resources named serve as examples and do not imply endorsement by NCI. The fact that a certain product/resource is not named does not imply that such product/resource is unsatisfactory.

National Institutes of Health Clinical Center
Bethesda, MD 20892
Questions about the Clinical Center?
<http://www.cc.nih.gov/comments.shtml>



2002