



My Spinal Surgery: Going Home

The Spinal Surgery Team has prepared this insert containing information to help prepare you and your family for going home after your spinal surgery.

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Author: Spinal Program, Krembil Neuroscience Centre
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Welcome to the Spinal Program, UHN Krembil Neuroscience Centre

Welcome to the Spinal Program, which is part of the Krembil Neuroscience Centre at UHN. We in the Spinal Program are very passionate about the care of our patients. Through research, we continuously search for ways to advance, treat and cure spinal cord injuries and spinal disorders.

Our Spinal Program has prepared this Spinal Surgery “insert” containing customized information to help you and your family prepare for going home after your surgery.

This is part of our commitment to providing excellent patient care.

Please read this insert once you know you are having spinal surgery. Let your family also read this binder and please bring it with you to the hospital. You will need it as we go through the surgical journey.

Thank you.

Spinal Program Team,
Krembil Neuroscience Centre

Spinal Surgery

Information for Patients, Families and Caregivers

This section of the “My Surgery” binder provides you with information about going home after your spinal surgery.

Going Home

Most people go home after surgery or stay with friends or family. In some cases, temporary changes may have to be made to your home so that you can stay on a main floor and not have to climb stairs. Or, you may stay with friends or family so that you can get the care you need.

How will I manage at home?

Personal Care (eg. bathing, dressing and other self-care tasks):

You may be eligible for help at home from a Personal Support Worker (PSW) through the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC). CCAC is a government service, and funded through OHIP. A CCAC coordinator at Toronto Western Hospital can assess you. This happens before your discharge from the hospital. Services are limited and if, for example, you don't qualify, or feel that you would like more than what CCAC can provide, you may choose to hire privately. The social worker can give you a list of private health care agencies.

Home Making:

CCAC does not help with homemaking activities such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping and pet care. Our Social Worker can give you more information about paid services such as Meals on Wheels and grocery delivery services.

Physiotherapy

Most people do not need physiotherapy when they first go home. Instead, try to slowly do more walking. Short walks throughout the day are very good for you and will help you recover. You will feel better and stronger. When you come back to see your surgeon at your follow up appointment in 6 to 8 weeks, they will give you a physiotherapy referral. You can go to a physiotherapy centre near your home or ask your family doctor where you can have your physiotherapy.

Sometimes we make referrals for an OHIP-covered physiotherapist (provided by CCAC) to see you in your home after surgery for a short period of time to make sure you're doing well and make sure your home is set up as safely as possible.

If you need more physiotherapy when you go home, your physiotherapist may refer you to an OHIP-covered out-patient program (which you would travel to from home). The waiting list is usually about 4 to 8 weeks.

If there is no out-patient program available to you, or if you want more therapy, your physiotherapist can give you information about private physiotherapy services which are not covered by OHIP. If you have medical insurance, (other than OHIP), check to see if your plan will cover physiotherapy.

While At Home

Do I Need a Follow-up Appointment?

Yes. You will have a follow-up appointment with your surgeon about 6 to 8 weeks after surgery. This will be arranged before your discharge from hospital. The appointment date will be included in your information package.

You may need to have an x-ray done on the day of your appointment. Please go to the X-ray department 1 hour before your appointment with your surgeon. For directions to the X-ray department, please ask at the Information Desk in the hospital atrium. Please bring your blue hospital card and OHIP card with you to all your hospital visits.



When should I call my Surgeon's Office, Nurse Practitioner or Advanced Practice Nurse?

You should call your surgeon's office, Nurse Practitioner or Advanced Practice Nurse if you:

- have questions or concerns about your operation
- notice any signs of infection in the incision such as
 - fever (higher than 37.5°C or 98.6°F)
 - increased redness, swelling, leaking or pain from the incision
- have a lot more pain after surgery

For neck surgery patients:

- have a lot of trouble swallowing, hoarseness of your voice that is getting worse, a lot of swelling or pain on the front of the neck



After hours you can reach the neurosurgeon or spine surgeon on call at 416-340-3155.

When should I call my family doctor?

Call your family doctor:

- to make an appointment for a check up within 1 week of going home
- to talk about any other health issues
- to remove stitches or staples 10-14 days after your surgery (your nurse will check this for you before you go home); when you leave the hospital, we will give you a staple remover to bring to your family doctor
- to renew or change your pain medication prescription
- if you notice swelling or pain in your lower leg

When can I have a shower?

DO NOT shower until 4 days after your surgery or follow the advice your surgical team gave you.

After you shower, gently pat the incision dry with a clean towel. Shampoo your hair while you are in the shower. DO NOT take a bath, swim or use a hot tub for at least 2 weeks. Your wound should be completely healed.

If you wear a neck collar after surgery, check with your surgical team about wearing it in the shower. Often people use a separate hard collar from the hospital or separate foam inserts for their own collar for showering.

How do I care for my incision?

- Do not scratch your incision area.
- Do not use lotion, powder or oil on the incision for 4 weeks. After 4 weeks, you can use Vitamin E around the sides of the incision as long as it is dry and healed.
- Keep your incision covered with the dressing for the length of time your nurse told you to before your discharge home. After that, leave it uncovered as long as there is no leaking.

How do I cope with my pain at home?

- You will be given a prescription for pain medication. Take the medication as prescribed.
- Ask your family doctor for a refill of your pain medication if you need it. Your surgeon will not prescribe a refill of your pain medication.
- You may feel different levels of pain especially as you begin to do more of your daily activities.
- To help keep the pain under control, take the medication before going for a walk or before doing any activities that may cause pain, or before the pain becomes very bad.
- As you feel less pain, you can slowly take less and less of the pain medication. Your family doctor can help with this.
- You may get constipated because of the pain medication. To help with that, try to eat food high in bulk or fibre (for example bran and fruit). Drink plenty of fluids.
- Take a stool softener every day while you are taking narcotics. If you have not had a bowel movement after 1 or 2 days, take a laxative if you need to. You can get this from the pharmacy without a prescription.
- In the case of low back surgery, you may feel some muscle spasms across your back and down your legs. If the nerves in your legs are inflamed or irritated, you may have some leg pain until the inflammation settles.



How do I stop taking the pain medication?

The pain will be less each week. You may ask your family doctor to prescribe a milder type of pain medication and to assist you in weaning off your pain medication. It is better to slowly reduce the medication than to suddenly stop taking it.

Is it normal to feel tired after surgery?

Yes, feeling tired is a normal part of recovery. You may feel tired for weeks or months after the surgery. Try to focus on the future and take positive steps toward your recovery.

What activities can I do after surgery?

Is there anything I should be careful about?

Unless your surgeon has told you to wear a brace or collar or has told you to avoid certain movements, the general rule is “Let pain be your guide.” You should not do anything that causes you a lot of pain. It is expected that you will have some pain, however. There are no strict rules about avoiding bending, twisting, lifting, etc.

Generally:

- avoid lifting more than about 4.5 kilograms (10 pounds)
- avoid sitting for long periods of time without getting up every 30 to 60 minutes to walk around
- avoid vigorous housework or yard work
- stop playing sports (including walking on the treadmill or stationary bicycle) until you have talked to your surgeon
- walk, climb stairs and do your usual daily activities until you see your surgeon on your follow-up appointment in 6 to 8 weeks

What about driving?

You will not be able to drive right after your surgery. Check with your surgeon or your Nurse Practitioner / Advanced Practice Nurse before before you go home from the hospital for more advice. You should not drive if you are on narcotics, in a lot of pain, very tired or if you have problems with your vision.

Do not drive while wearing a brace or collar. Generally, you are not insured to drive a car while wearing a neck collar.

When can I return to work?

Talk to your surgeon and employer about when you can go back to work. A graduated return to work may be best.

What can I eat or drink after my surgery?

You may not feel hungry after your surgery, and a large meal may not settle well in your stomach. Try eating small frequent meals until you build back up to what you normally would eat.

If you have an upset stomach or vomiting, you can take anti-nausea medication, such as Gravol, which you can buy from your pharmacy without a prescription. Take it as directed and keep drinking fluids until the nausea passes. Then gradually start eating solid food again. If this problem continues, see your family doctor.

If you have had neck surgery, you may also have a sore throat or some discomfort for several weeks when swallowing. Try to eat different kinds of food that are easy to swallow. For example, you can start with soft food such as yogurt, Jello, ice cream, mashed potato, pudding, clear soup and minced food. Drink fluids such as water, tea, coffee, apple juice and orange juice. (Mix orange juice with some water which is better for your sore throat).



How long will my recovery from spine surgery take?

Expect a full recovery from surgery to take from 3 to 12 months or even up to 1 1/2 years for internal healing. It may take you weeks or months to feel your usual energy so you can do your everyday activities again.

Recovery depends on your surgery and how well you could move before your surgery. Keep positive, eat well, rest and exercise. Focus on small improvements each day and keep your long-term goals in mind.