



Physiotherapy advice after abdominal surgery (page 1 of 4)

If you normally suffer from breathing problems, or if you have had an operation involving a large incision (cut), then a physiotherapist may come to see you after your operation.

Not everyone will need to be seen by a physiotherapist, so this leaflet will give you some easy exercises and advice to help you recover from your operation.

Please check with your surgeon or stoma care nurse before undertaking any exercise programme.

Breathing exercises

The following deep breathing exercises can be performed while sitting as upright as possible in bed or preferably, in a chair.

1. Relax your shoulders and upper chest.
2. Take a slow, deep breath in (through your nose, if possible) to fill your lungs as fully as you can.
3. Hold this breath for 3 seconds.
4. Breathe out slowly through your mouth.

Take 3 to 6 of these deep breaths then rest; doing more than this may make you light-headed. Practice your breathing exercises frequently, making sure you do them at least 3 to 4 times an hour when you are awake. You can start as soon as you wake up after your operation, until you are up and about.

Coughing

Coughing is the normal way to clear phlegm from your lungs. You may need to do this more often in the first few days following your operation.

To help you cough, support your wound firmly with a towel or pillow – this will ease any discomfort from your wound. Alternatively you can loosen any phlegm by doing a ‘huff’. This is a forced breath out through your open mouth, as if steaming up a mirror.

Sitting out of bed and walking

The best activity for your lungs is to get up on your feet as soon after your operation as possible. Gentle activity helps to prevent a chest infection, helps your gut start working again and maintains your circulation.

The nursing staff will help you to sit out in a chair on the first morning after your operation or on the same day as your operation. They will

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continue to help you until you are able to do this yourself. Drips or drains can move with you and will not stop you getting out of bed. You should aim to sit out of bed twice a day, at first for one hour then gradually increasing the time each day. Some weakness and tiredness is to be expected but it is important to try and do a little more each day.

Nursing staff will help you to practise and improve your walking until you are able to walk safely by yourself. Once you can do so, you will then be responsible for walking regularly on the ward until you go home. If you have stairs at home, and are concerned about how you may manage them, the physiotherapist can practise these with you whilst you are in hospital. Nursing staff will refer you to the physiotherapists if required.

To get out of bed: Bend both knees up and roll onto your side by moving your shoulders and knees together. As you lower your feet to the floor, use your arms to push yourself into a sitting position on the side of the bed.

Abdominal exercises

Start day 2

Why: Help strengthen your deep abdominal muscles, enhance blood flow to the area and promote healing.

Position: Lie on your bed with your head on a pillow, knees bent and feet flat on the bed.

1. **Static abdominals:** Place your hands on your lower tummy. Breathe in through your nose and as you breathe out, gently pull your tummy away from your hands towards your back. Feel the muscles tighten, try to hold for a count of 3 and then relax. Breathe in and out normally throughout this.



2. **Pelvic tilting:** Place your hands in the hollow of your back. Tighten your tummy muscles (as in exercise 1), flatten your lower back onto the bed and tilt your bottom. Breathe normally. Hold for 3 seconds and release gently.



3. **Knee rolling:** Tighten your tummy muscles (as in exercise 1) and gently lower both knees to one side as far as is comfortable. Bring them back to the middle and relax. Repeat to the other side.



Do each of these exercises 3 times a day and repeat each one 5 times. Do more repetitions as you feel able. You should continue these exercises for at least 3 months.

Discontinue the exercises if they cause you any pain and seek advice from your physiotherapist.

Posture and back care

It is important to be aware of your posture and take special care for about six weeks after your surgery. A good posture will help to prevent muscle fatigue.

Sitting

Sit upright in a supportive chair, if possible, with both feet on the floor. Do not slouch. You may find it helpful to place a small cushion or rolled towel in the small of your back.

Standing or walking

Avoid holding your tummy with your hands and slouching forwards. Stand upright with shoulders back, keep bottom and tummy tucked in.

Lifting

Do not lift heavy objects for at least 6 weeks. When you need to lift or pick something up, bend your knees and keep your back straight. Hold larger objects close to your body.

If you have back pain after your operation, seek advice from your physiotherapist or GP.

Advice on discharge

Week 1-2:

You will probably tire easily so have plenty of rest, but you do not need to stay in bed. After being at home for a few days you can build up your strength and stamina by having a short walk each day. Start with 5 – 10 minutes and gradually try to add to your distance every day. It is safe for you to go up and down stairs from the day you go home, if you usually do so.

Week 2-3:

You can start to make light meals and carry out light chores, such as wiping-up and dusting. When possible, sit rather than stand. Increase your walking time and distance each week. Use street furniture such as lampposts and trees as markers of your progress. Some days you will feel better than others, this is quite normal. Remember – **do not do too much, too soon!**

Week 4-6:

You can gradually do more household jobs such as ironing and cooking. Break tasks down into smaller parts and ask other people to help. Your stomach muscles will gradually strengthen over this period and you will then be able to get back to normal. Aim to be walking between 30-45 minutes by 6 weeks if it is normal for you to do so. **You must still avoid heavy lifting and standing for long periods of time.**

Week 6-12:

You can usually begin more strenuous tasks such as vacuuming, so that by week 12 you are back to normal. Please discuss getting back to more strenuous forms of exercise with your GP or surgeon, as they will advise you according to your recovery so far.