

# Your Guide to Self-Care After Lung Surgery

---

To help you take care of yourself after you leave the hospital, the staff has prepared this booklet listing guidelines important to your health. Your nurse will review these guidelines with you. If you have questions, ask your doctor or nurse.

## Care of your incisions

You will have more than one incision after your surgery, and exactly where they are will depend on the surgery you had. There will be incision(s) from the surgical site and incision(s) from the chest tube(s).

**Surgical incision.** By the time you are ready to leave the hospital, your incision will be almost healed. You should look at your incision with your nurse before you leave the hospital so you know what it looks like. If any fluid is draining from your incision, you should also note the amount and color.

**Chest tube incision.** You will have small dressing(s) covering any incisions from the chest tube. Some drainage from these areas is normal. The dressing needs to stay on for 48 hours after the chest tube is removed, unless it gets wet. If it gets wet you should change it as soon as you can.

Change the dressings at least once a day and more often if it becomes wet with drainage. When these incisions have no drainage they can be left uncovered.

Continue to shower daily. Do not take baths until you discuss it with your doctor at your post operative appointment. Use soap when you shower and gently wash all of your incisions. Pat the areas dry with a towel after showering and leave the incisions uncovered.

If you go home with adhesive strips on your incision, they may loosen and fall off by themselves. If they have not fallen off, take them off 7 to 10 days after you leave the hospital.

## Control of incisional pain

The length of time each person has pain or discomfort varies. Some people may have incisional soreness, tightness, or muscular aches for up to 6 months or longer. It does not mean that something is wrong.

The pain-relieving medication prescribed for you is: \_\_\_\_\_

Call your doctor if the medication does not relieve the pain.

- Do not drive or drink alcohol while you are taking prescription pain medication.
- As your incision heals, you will have less pain. As time goes on, the amount of pain medicine that you need will decrease. A mild pain reliever such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil®) will relieve aches and discomfort.
- Pain medicine should help you as you resume your normal activities. Take enough medicine to do your exercises in comfort. Pain medicine is most effective 30 to 45 minutes after taking it.
- Keep track of when you take pain medicine. It will not be as effective if the pain has been allowed to increase. Taking it when pain first begins is more effective than waiting for the pain to get worse.

- Do not take any medicine that has aspirin without asking your doctor. Aspirin can cause bleeding. Ask your nurse for the *Common Medicines Containing Aspirin and Nonsteroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDS)* fact card. It lists common medicines that have aspirin.
- Pain medicines can cause constipation. To prevent this side effect:
  - Increase the fiber content of your diet. That will soften your stool naturally. Foods high in fiber include:
    - bran and whole grain cereals and breads
    - unpeeled fresh fruits
    - vegetables
    - salads
    - stewed or dried fruits such as prunes, apricots, figs, and raisins
  - Take a stool softener such as Colace® 3 times a day and take a mild laxative such as Senokot® at night. If you have not had a bowel movement in two days, take Milk of Magnesia® at bedtime and call your doctor.
  - Maintain your activity level. Walking helps to prevent constipation. It is also a good form exercise.
- Taking a warm shower is relaxing and helps decrease muscle aches.
- Women may feel more comfortable wearing a soft bra with soft padding. Try using a handkerchief under the part that touches the incision. Some women find they are comfortable not wearing a bra at all as the incision heals.

## Guide for better breathing

There are things you can do to improve your breathing and help your lungs heal after surgery. You should do the following for about 4 weeks, or as long as your doctor tells you to:

- Do your coughing and deep breathing exercises and use the incentive spirometer 3 to 4 times a day. These exercises will help keep your lungs expanded and clear of secretions.
- Drink fluids. Liquids help keep sputum thin and easy to cough up. Ask your doctor how much fluid you should drink each day. If your fluid intake is not limited, drink at least 6 large glasses of water or other liquids (preferably juices) each day.
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom during the winter months. Follow the directions for cleaning the machine. Change the water often.
- Avoid sources of infection, such as contact with people with colds, sore throats, or the flu.
- **DO NOT SMOKE!** Smoking cigarettes is harmful to your health at any time. It is even more so at this time. Smoking causes the blood vessels in your lungs to become narrow. This causes a decrease in oxygen in the lungs. It can cause problems with breathing and activities. If you are a smoker, your doctor, nurse or social worker will suggest ways to stop. You may want to speak with someone from the MSKCC Tobacco Cessation Program for more help. Their phone number is (212) 610-0507. It is also important to avoid places that are smoky. Your nurse can also give you information to help you deal with other smokers or situations where smoke is present.

### Deep Breathing

Relax your shoulders. Place one hand over your abdomen to feel the motion.

Breathe in deeply through your nose. Let your abdominal muscles relax and feel your lower abdomen expand into your hand.

Blow out slowly through your mouth with your lips pursed. As you blow out, tighten your abdominal muscles and feel your abdomen flatten under your hand.

Keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed during the exercise.

Breathe slowly and deeply.

## Maintaining Your Nutrition

Eating a balanced diet high in calories and protein is important for healing after surgery. Your diet should include a good protein source at each meal, as well as fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Good protein sources:

Meat (beef, pork, lamb)	Eggs
Poultry (chicken, turkey)	Legumes (kidney beans, black beans, lentils)
Fish	Soy (tofu, edamame, soy nuts)
Dairy (milk, cheese, yogurt)	Nuts
Quinoa (a high protein grain)	

Have a variety of fruits and vegetables and whole grains. Aim for at least two servings of fruit and three servings of vegetables each day. A serving size is a medium sized fresh fruit, ½ cup diced fruit, 1 cup raw leafy greens, ½ cup chopped fresh or cooked vegetables or ¾ cup of fruit or vegetable juice. You should also include whole grain breads, cereals, rice and pasta.

If you are eating less than usual after surgery, concentrate on the protein foods listed above paired with complex carbohydrates such as bread, pasta, potatoes or rice. Also, try small, frequent meals, as large meals may be overwhelming. Include some of the high calorie, high protein supplements and snacks listed below:

- Double Milk: Mix 1 quart whole milk with one envelope non-fat dry milk powder. Blend well and refrigerate. Use as a beverage, in cereal, in pudding, pancake and hot chocolate mixes in place of water or regular milk
- Milkshakes, Ensure®, Boost® or Carnation Instant Breakfast Drink®
- Fruit yogurt or Greek yogurt
- Puddings and custards
- ½ sandwich with a high protein filling like peanut butter, cheese, tuna, egg salad or turkey
- Cheese or peanut butter with crackers or fruit
- Hummus with pita
- Roasted nuts, trail mix, sunflower or sesame seeds

For more tips on increasing your calorie and protein intake, ask for the booklet *Eating Well During and After Your Cancer Treatment*. If you have questions about your individual diet, ask to see the dietitian while you are in the hospital or call (212) 639-7071 to make an appointment with an outpatient dietitian.

## Resuming activity

It is normal to have less energy than usual. The amount of time that it takes to return to former activities varies with each person. Try to increase your activities each day as much as you can. Always balance activity periods with rest periods. Rest is a vital part of your recovery.

Spread your activities over the course of the day. Walking and stair climbing are excellent forms of exercise. Gradually increase the distance you walk. Avoid walking outdoors if it is very cold, very hot, or very windy. Climb stairs slowly, resting or stopping as needed.

You can do light household tasks. Try dusting, washing dishes, preparing light meals, and other activities as you are able. You may return to your normal sexual activity as soon as your incision is well healed and you can do so without pain or fatigue.

Your body is an excellent guide in telling you when you have done too much. When you increase your activity, monitor your body's reaction. You may find that you have more energy in the morning or the afternoon. Plan your activities for times of the day when you have more energy.

### Regaining arm and shoulder function

Use the affected arm and shoulder in all of your activities. Use them when you bathe, brush your hair, and reach up to a cabinet shelf. Slowly resume your normal activities. That will help restore full use of your shoulder. The exercises shown in the pictures on the following pages will help you to regain full arm and shoulder movement.

#### Axillary Stretch

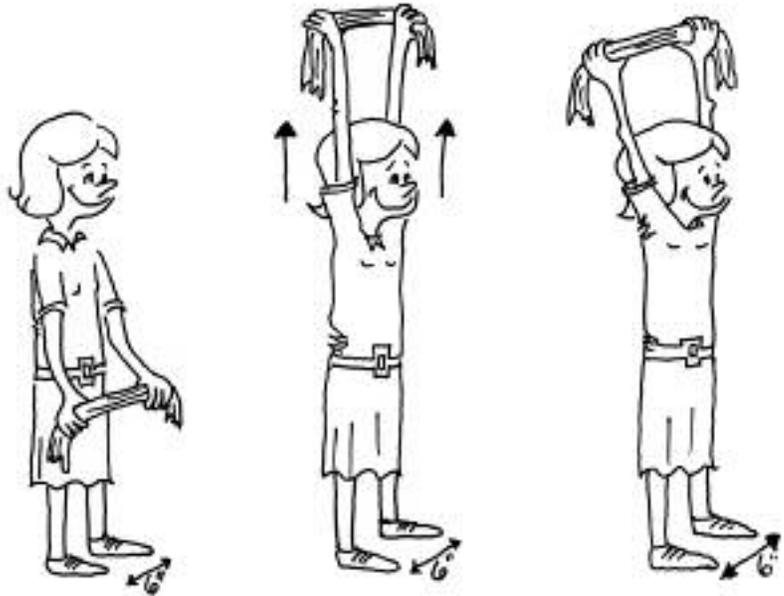
1. Sit in a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor.
2. Clasp your hands together.
3. Lift your arms up and overhead.
4. Slide your hands back to the back of your neck. Slowly twist the upper part of your body to the right side. Hold this position for 5 seconds while bringing your elbows as far back as possible. Return to the starting position. Slowly twist the upper part of your body to the left side. Hold this position for 5 seconds while bringing your elbows as far back as possible. Return to the starting position.



Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

## Stretch

1. Stand comfortably with your feet about 6 inches apart.
2. Put your arms in front of your body and hold one end of a hand towel in each hand. Bring your arms over your head, elbows straight, and stretch towards the upper back. Do not arch your back and do not force the movement if it is difficult. Try to hold the position for five seconds. Relax and return to the starting position.
3. Stand as in #1. Start with your hands grasping the towel behind your back and lift upward as far as possible. Be sure to stand straight. Try to hold the position for 5 seconds. Return to the starting position.



Repeat \_\_\_\_\_

Illustrations by Kenny DeSantis

## Emotional aspects

After surgery for a serious illness, you may have new and upsetting feelings. Many patients say they felt weepy, sad, worried, nervous, irritable, and angry at one time or another. You may find that you cannot control some of these feelings. If this happens, it's a good idea to seek emotional support.

The first step in coping is to talk about how you feel. Family and friends can help. Your nurse, doctor, and social worker can reassure, support, and guide you. It is always a good idea to let these professionals know how you, your family, and your friends are feeling emotionally. Many resources are available to patients and their families. Whether you are in the hospital or at home, the nurses, doctors, and social workers are here to help you and your family and friends handle the emotional aspects of your illness.

## Follow-up visits

- Follow-up visits are a vital part of your treatment; keep them even if you are feeling well.
- If you have any problems before your scheduled appointment date, call your doctor's office.
- If you have any questions about caring for yourself at home, contact the nurses on the unit.

## Ask your doctor when you can:

- Drive a car. Do not drive for about 3 to 4 weeks after surgery. Driving may place added strain on your incision, and may cause pain. Do not drive while you are taking prescription pain medicines.
- Lift heavy objects. Do not lift objects over 10 pounds until your doctor tells you it is safe.

- Resume vigorous exercise. Do not play sports until your doctor tells you it is safe. When you resume, remember that it will take time for you to return to your previous level of activity. Start out slowly and increase your activity as you feel better.
- Return to Work. Most people are able to return to their previous work. The time it will take depends on the type of work, the type of surgery, and how fast your body heals.
- Travel by air. Most patients are able to travel by air after their post-operative appointment. Call your doctor's office if you have questions about how you should travel.

**Call your doctor if you have:**

- Increased pain, redness, swelling, or drainage from the incision.
- A fever (101° F or 38.3° C).
- Any unexplained problems.
- New or worsening shortness of breath.
- Pain that is not relieved with your medicine.
- Any new symptom or physical change.
- Any questions or concerns.

**Telephone Numbers**

Doctor: \_\_\_\_\_

Office Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Ask for your doctor or the thoracic fellow on call. After office hours and on weekends call (212) 639-2000.

Unit: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Nurse: \_\_\_\_\_



Memorial Sloan-Kettering  
Cancer Center