Caring for Yourself After Your Orthopaedic Surgery

This information will help you care for yourself after your orthopaedic surgery.

How to Care for Your Incision

Follow these guidelines to care for your incision (surgical cut). If your healthcare provider gave you other instructions (such as leaving your dressing in place until your post op visit) follow your healthcare provider’s instructions to care for your incision.

Changing your dressing (bandage)

If your healthcare provider covered your incision with a regular dressing (white gauze and tape):

- Don’t remove or change your dressing for 2 days after your surgery.
- After 2 days, remove your dressing. Replace it with clean, dry gauze.
- Change the gauze every day and whenever it gets wet or dirty.

If your healthcare provider covered your incision with a Mepilex dressing (a tan dressing with a soft, squishy center):

- Don’t remove or change your Mepilex dressing for 1 week after your surgery.
- After 1 week, remove your Mepilex dressing. Replace it with clean, dry gauze.
- Change the gauze every day and whenever it gets wet or dirty

Look at your incision each time you change your gauze. Your incision may look slightly red, swollen, or bruised. This is normal. If your incision is getting more red
or swollen or if you notice drainage (liquid) or a bad smell coming from your incision, call your healthcare provider. These things are signs of an infection.

Caring for your incision

- Don’t get your incision wet until you see your healthcare provider at your follow-up appointment. You can sponge bathe, but make sure to cover your incision with a cast bag, clean garbage bag and tape, or plastic wrap and tape to keep it dry. Your healthcare provider will tell you when you can start washing your incision.
- Don’t put lotions or creams on your incision unless your healthcare provider tells you to.
- If your incision is closed with sutures (stitches) or staples, they will likely be removed during your follow-up appointment.
- If your incision is covered with Steri-Strips™ (thin pieces of paper tape), leave them in place until they fall off or until your healthcare provider takes them off.

Caring for Yourself

- Don’t exercise (such as lift weights or jog) until your healthcare provider tells you it’s safe. If you have any questions about playing any sports or other activities, ask your healthcare provider.
- Don’t drive until your healthcare provider tells you it’s safe.
- When you’re sitting or lying down, rest your affected arm or leg (the arm or leg you had surgery on) on pillows so it’s higher than your heart. This will decrease and prevent swelling.
  - If you had surgery on your leg, don’t sit with your legs lower than the level of your heart for more than 2 hours at a time. Lie in bed, on a couch, or in a recliner with your leg resting on a pillow so it’s higher than your heart. Change your position every 2 hours, whether you’re sitting or lying down.
  - If you had surgery on your arm, rest it on pillows so it’s above the level of your heart.
If you notice swelling in your affected arm or leg, raise it more often. If the swelling doesn’t get better, call your healthcare provider.

**Using Medical Equipment**

After your surgery, you may need to use special medical equipment (such as a brace, splint, sling, cane, or crutches). Your healthcare provider will give you information.

If you had surgery on your arm, you may need to wear a sling. Your healthcare provider will show you how to wear it.

If you had surgery on your leg or foot, you may need to use crutches. Crutches reduce the amount of weight you place on your leg or foot. This helps you heal by taking pressure off your bone.

It’s important to use crutches correctly to prevent damage to the nerves in your armpits or palms of your hands. Your healthcare provider will show you how to use crutches before you leave the hospital.

**Medication**

- Your healthcare provider may give you a prescription for pain medication. Follow their instructions for taking it.
- Pain medication can cause constipation (having fewer bowel movements than usual). To help prevent constipation:
  - Drink at least 8 (8-ounce) glasses of liquids every day.
    - Drink water, juices, soups, and other drinks that don’t have caffeine.
    - Drinks with caffeine (such as coffee and soda) and alcohol pull fluid out of your body.
  - Eat 5 to 9 servings of fresh fruits and vegetables per day.
- Ask your healthcare provider about using a stool (poop) softener or laxative, such as docusate sodium (Colace®) or senna (Senekot®). Make sure to take it as instructed.
• Call your healthcare provider if you haven’t had a bowel movement in 3 days.
• Don’t take the following medications for 1 week after your surgery:
  ○ Aspirin
  ○ Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®)
  ○ Vitamin E

These medications can cause bleeding. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions. For more information, read our resource Common Medications Containing Aspirin and Other Nonsteroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) (www.mskcc.org/pe/common_meds).

Follow-up Appointment

Call your healthcare provider’s office on the next business day (Monday through Friday) after your surgery to make a follow-up appointment.

When to Call Your Healthcare Provider

Call your healthcare provider if you have any of the following:

• A fever of 100.4 °F (38.0 °C) or higher
• Numbness, tingling, or burning in your fingers or toes
• Pain that doesn’t get better with pain medication
• Drainage or a bad smell coming from your incision site
• Trouble moving your fingers or toes
• Increased swelling that doesn’t get better when you raise your affected arm or leg
• Fingers or toes that are very cold and don’t get warm when you cover them
• Increased redness around your incision
• Any unexpected problems or concerns
Call 911 if you have chest pain or trouble breathing.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.