Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

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, follow their instructions to care for your incision.

Changing your dressing (bandage)

Before you leave the hospital, your surgeon will give you instructions for caring for your dressing at home. Keep your dressing on until your surgeon sees you at your post-op (after surgery) appointment. This is usually 1 to 3 weeks after surgery. Follow any different instructions your surgeon gives you.

Caring for your incision

- Do not get your incision and dressing wet until you see your healthcare provider at your post-op appointment.

You can sponge bathe. Cover your dressing 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 getting your incision wet.

- Do not 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 post-op appointment.

Caring for yourself

- Do not 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.
- Do not drive until your healthcare provider tells you it’s safe.
- When you’re sitting or lying down, elevate the arm or leg you had surgery on. Rest it on pillows so it’s higher than your heart. This will decrease and prevent swelling.
    - If you had surgery on your leg, do not 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. Rest your leg 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 higher than your heart.
- If you notice swelling in your affected arm or leg, raise it more often. If the swelling does not get better, call your healthcare provider.

Using medical equipment

After your surgery, you may need to use special medical equipment. This can be a brace, splint, sling, cane, or crutches. Your healthcare provider will give you more information. You may meet with the physical therapists before you leave the hospital. They will check what you need and answer any questions you may have.

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 the right way. This prevents harm to the nerves in your armpits or palms of your hands.

Your healthcare provider or physical therapist will show you how to use crutches before you leave the hospital.

Pain management and side effects

- Your healthcare provider may give you a prescription for pain medicine such as Oxycodone (Percocet®) or Tramadol (Ultram®). Follow their instructions for taking it.
- Pain medicine 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 a 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 medicines for 1 week after your surgery:

- Aspirin.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®).
- Vitamin E.

These medicines can cause bleeding. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions. For more information, read our resource *How To Check if a Medicine or Supplement Has Aspirin, Other NSAIDs, Vitamin E, or Fish Oil* (www.mskcc.org/pe/check-med-supplement).

If you are seeing a Pain Management or Supportive Care provider at MSK or locally, contact their office after your surgery to schedule a follow up appointment. They can discuss refills for pain medicines and ongoing pain management.

Follow-up appointment

Your follow-up appointment (your post-op appointment) can be scheduled before you leave the hospital. You can use MSK MyChart, our patient portal, to confirm or re-schedule your appointment when you get home. You can also call your healthcare provider.

When to call your healthcare provider

You can always speak to an orthopaedic surgeon at MSK 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

From Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., call your surgeon's office.

After 5 p.m., during the weekend, and on holidays, call 212-639-2000 and ask to speak to the orthopaedic surgeon on call. Do not send messages in your MSK MyChart account during these hours or if you are having a medical emergency.

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 medicine.
- Drainage or a bad smell coming from your incision site.
- Trouble moving your fingers or toes.
- Increased swelling that does not 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.
- Any questions.

Call 911 if you have if you have chest pain or trouble breathing.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

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

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