Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Exercises After Ostomy Surgery: Level 1

This information describes exercises you can do to help your body recover after you've had ostomy surgery. An exercise program with gentle movements will help activate (use) your muscles and prevent stiffness. It will also help you move better.

Our ostomy exercise program has 2 parts. This is part 1. You can visit *Exercises After Ostomy Surgery: Level 2* (www.mskcc.org/pe/ostomy-exercises-2) to see part 2 of this exercise program. **Do not start part 2 until your care team tells you it's safe.**

What to do before you start this exercise program

Talk with your healthcare provider before you start this program. Your healthcare provider or rehabilitation (rehab) therapist may change the exercises to meet your needs.

Your care team will talk with you about movements to avoid while your incisions (surgical cuts) are healing. Follow their instructions. Contact them if you have any questions.

In general:

- **Do not lift or carry anything heavier than 10 pounds (4.5 kilograms) for 6 weeks after surgery.** For example, a 6-week-old baby, a full laundry basket, or a large trash bag often weighs more than 10 pounds. After 6 weeks, you can slowly start lifting and carrying heavier objects. Talk with your care team if you have any questions.

- **Avoid pushing or pulling moderate to heavy objects as much as you can for 6 weeks after surgery.** A full grocery cart or large garbage pail with trash in it are examples of moderate to heavy items. After 6 weeks, you can slowly start pushing and pulling heavier objects. Talk with your care team if you have any questions.
- **Do not do sit-ups, planks, pushups, or any strenuous exercise for 6 weeks after surgery.** A strenuous exercise is something that takes lots of energy or effort. These exercises can put extra stress on your abdominal (belly) muscles. Avoiding them will help prevent a hernia (bulging of an organ or tissue) through your incision or around your ostomy.

Talk with your Wound, Ostomy, and Continence (WOC) nurse after your surgery and during your post-op visit. They'll help you learn more about how to prevent a hernia around your stoma. Your stoma is the place on your abdomen (belly) where gas and poop will leave your body.

Exercise tips

- Wear your abdominal support binder when doing these exercises. Lie down to put it on. Your WOC nurse will teach you how to put it on.
- Dress for comfort. Wear clothing that will not limit your movements.
- For exercises you do lying down, support your head and shoulders with pillows, if needed. You can also bend your knees, put a pillow under your knees, or both. Make sure you're comfortable.
- For exercises you do while standing, keep your back straight and pull your belly button to your spine. This helps activate your abdominal muscles.
- Avoid holding your breath while doing any of these exercises. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Do the exercise movements when you breathe out. Count out loud during the exercises to keep your breaths evenly paced.
- **Stop doing any exercise that causes pain or discomfort.** Tell your healthcare provider or rehab therapist which exercise caused pain or discomfort. You can still do the other exercises.

Exercises

Your healthcare provider or rehab therapist will tell you how many times each day to do these exercises. Your physical therapist (PT) will show you how to do each exercise. Follow your care team's instructions.

Do these exercises for at least the first 6 weeks after your surgery. It can be helpful to keep doing them even after starting the level 2 exercises.

Diaphragmatic breathing

Diaphragmatic (DY-uh-fruh-MA-tik) breathing is an exercise that can relax your chest wall and abdominal muscles. Your diaphragm is a thin muscle that separates your chest from your belly.

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat. Place one or both of your hands over your belly.
2. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Your belly should rise, but your upper chest should stay still and relaxed.
3. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips, like you're blowing out candles. As you breathe out, slowly and gently pull your belly towards your spine.

Repeat this movement 5 times. If your care team gives you different instructions, follow those instead.

Overhead chest wall stretch and 4-8-8 breathing

This stretch loosens your chest muscles and helps air move in and out of your lungs. This can bring more oxygen into your whole body.

1. You can do this exercise while lying down or standing.
    - If you're lying down, lie on your back with your arms at your sides. Make sure you have enough room to raise your arms over your head.
    - If you're standing, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and your arms at your sides. Make sure your back is straight and your shoulders are back.
2. Breathe in for 4 seconds. As you do, slowly raise your arms out to the sides until they're over your head. Keep your arms straight.
3. Hold your breath and keep your arms up for 8 seconds, if you can.
4. Breathe out through pursed lips (as if you're blowing out candles) for 8 seconds. As you do, slowly lower your arms back to your sides. Keep your arms straight.
5. Relax for 1 to 2 seconds.

Repeat this movement 5 times. If your care team gives you different instructions, follow those instead.

Core (abdominal) activation

This exercise helps you practice activating (using) the muscles in your core. When you activate these muscles, your movements are more stable. This helps you avoid injury.

1. Lie on your back or stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Place 1 hand on your upper belly. Place your other hand on your lower belly.
2. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Feel your belly rise and fall under your hands.
3. With your next breath out, gently pull your belly button towards your spine. Focus on the feeling of your abdominal muscles contracting (squeezing).
4. With your next breath in, slowly release the contraction and let your belly expand.

Repeat this movement 10 times. Over time, you will be able to hold the contraction while you breathe instead of releasing it with your next breath.

If your care team gives you different instructions, follow those instead.

Pelvic tilt

This exercise helps you practice activating the muscles in your core. When you activate these muscles, your movements are more stable. This helps you avoid injury.

1. You can do this exercise while lying down or standing.
    - If you're lying down, lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat.
    - If you're standing, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Make sure your back is straight and your shoulders are back.
2. Tuck your tailbone while pulling your belly button back towards your spine. To tuck your tailbone, imagine you're scooping your pelvis forward so your lower back is flat.
3. Once you feel your lower back flatten, hold the tilt for 3 to 5 seconds. Remember to breathe. Avoid holding your breath.
4. Gently release the tilt and move back to your starting position.

Repeat this movement 10 times. If your care team gives you different instructions, follow those instead.

Daily activities

You will need to adjust how you do your daily activities while you recover after your surgery.

- If you have a perineal incision, follow the instructions in *Safe Movements and Posture With an Ostomy: Instructions for People Who Cannot Sit* (www.mskcc.org/pe/ostomy-movements-cannot-sit). A perineal incision is a surgical cut between your anus and genitals (penis or vagina).
- If you do not have a perineal incision or your care team has told you it's safe to sit, follow the instructions in *Safe Movements and Posture With an Ostomy: Instructions for People Who Can Sit* (www.mskcc.org/pe/ostomy-movements-can-sit).

Here are examples of things it's **safe to do** during early recovery after surgery:

- Walking
- Pushing a light, small shopping cart
- Cooking

Here are examples of things you **should not do** during early recovery after surgery:

- Vacuuming
- Pushing a heavy, full shopping cart
- Pulling a heavy door, piece of furniture, or other object

Talk with your care team if you have questions about things you can and cannot do as you recover.

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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