

Activities of Daily Living After Spinal Decompression Surgery

Self-care for safety and healing

This handout gives self-care guidelines to follow after spinal decompression surgery. Follow these guidelines to protect your spine and help you recover.

Self-care

Follow the guidelines in this handout for your daily activities. At first, you may need to take a lot of breaks. Be sure to include rest times in your plan for each day.

Also, make sure you:

- Get a good night's sleep.
- Get dressed every day.
- Slowly resume the hobbies or other activities you enjoy.

Protect Your Spine

For 6 weeks, follow the **BLTs** for bending, lifting, and twisting:

- **Bending:** Do **not** bend your spine.
- **Lifting:** Do **not** lift more than 10 pounds. (A gallon of milk weighs almost 9 pounds.) Your doctor will tell you how much you can lift at your follow-up visits.
- **Twisting:** Do **not** twist your back or neck.

Sleeping

- Use a mattress with good support. Sleep in the position that is most comfortable for you.
- If you are wearing a neck brace, it can help to place a small pillow or a rolled towel under your neck.
- When lying on your back, place a pillow under your knees. This will lessen the stress on your back muscles.
- When lying on your side, place a pillow between your legs.



Recovery takes time. Be sure to resume activity slowly.

Getting Dressed

Do **not** twist your upper body when you get dressed and undressed. Wear loose-fitting tops that you can put on and take off without twisting your body.

Showers

- Do **not** let your incision get wet for _____ days.
- When you shower, wash and dry as far as you can without bending. Have someone else wash and dry the rest of your body.
- Once you are allowed to get your incision wet:
 - Let soap and water gently run over your incision. Do **not** rub the incision. Gently pat the area dry.
 - If your incision is still draining, you may apply a new dry gauze dressing after you shower.
- Do **not** take a bath, sit in a hot tub, go swimming, or use a sauna until your incision is fully healed.

Wound Care

- You may see a small amount of drainage from your incision. This should slowly lessen and then stop.
- Keep your incision dry and clean. Change the dry gauze dressing at least once a day.
- Do **not** apply creams, ointments, lotions, or powders to your incision.
- After your incision stops draining, you no longer need to apply a gauze dressing, unless needed for comfort.
- Do **not** peel off any of the skin glue applied during surgery.
- Avoid any movements that might cause your incision to open.
- Do **not** smoke or use nicotine products. This can slow or prevent wound healing.
- It is **OK** to take acetaminophen (Tylenol) and *non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs* (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn). These medicines can help lessen pain and inflammation. Follow the dose instructions on the bottle.

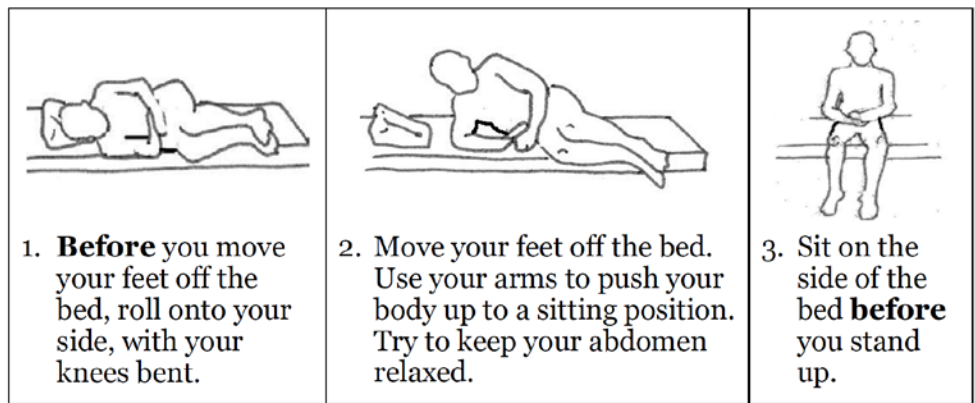
Activities

- **Avoid strenuous pushing, pulling, and lifting.** Ask someone else for help with activities such as lifting groceries, doing household chores or yard work, or picking up children, pets, and other items.
- **For 2 weeks, limit long car rides and flights** to prevent a blood clot. If you need to sit in the car or airplane for a long time, stretch or walk for 5 to 10 minutes every 30 to 45 minutes.

- **Do not drive** if you are wearing a neck brace.
- **Keep moving.** Walk 2 to 3 times daily. Gently swing your arms while walking. Start slowly and increase your distance as you feel stronger.
- **Practice good posture** to keep your abdominal muscles strong.
- **Use helpful devices** during your recovery. These may include a shower chair, a shower head that you can hold in your hand, a reach-and-grab tool, a long-handled loofa, a raised toilet seat, and ice packs. Try to get these tools before surgery. You can find many of them online at www.amazon.com or at a medical supply store.

Getting Out of Bed

Use the 3-step “logroll” method to get out of bed.



Sexual Activity

When you can resume sexual activity depends on how quickly you recover after surgery. It is best to wait until you talk with your doctor at your follow-up visit. Ask when it is OK to start being sexually active. If you have sex, be sure to follow your BLT precautions.

When to Call

Call the clinic at **206.744.9350 and press 2** if you have questions about your health or have any of these symptoms:

- Fever above 100°F (37.8°C) and chills
- More redness, heat, drainage, swelling, or increased tenderness at your incision
- If your incision is opening up
- New or worse pain
- Severe headache
- Feeling very tired
- Change in your bowel or bladder control
- New numbness or weakness in your arms or legs

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or other healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., call Harborview Spine Center: 206.744.9350 and press 2 when you hear the recording.