

After Your Amputation

Below, above, or through the knee

This handout explains what patients can expect when they are discharged from the hospital after having surgery to amputate their leg below, above, or through the knee.

Getting Home and to Your Clinic Visits

You will **not** be able to drive while you are recovering from your surgery. Your recovery may take 2 months or longer. Make sure that you have a reliable way to get to and from your follow-up visits during this time. If you need help getting to your visits, please talk with your social worker or doctor.

Help at Home

After your amputation, you will need someone to help take care of you at home. This person will need to help you get on and off the toilet, bathe, dress, get out of bed, go to the store, and make meals.

Talk with a family member or caregiver. Make plans for them to help you for the first 2 months after your surgery.



You will need someone to help take care of you for 2 months after surgery.

Staying Safe at Home

Your ability to get around will be limited during your recovery. For your safety, plan now for what you will need after surgery:

- Set up your home so that you do not need to use stairs.
- Plan to use a mobility device such as a wheelchair, walker, or crutches. Your physical therapist in the hospital will help you decide what device is best for your needs.
- At first, you may fall when you try to stand up after amputation. This can happen when you get up to go to the bathroom or when you are inside the bathroom. To avoid falling, keep your mobility device close by. Move slowly and carefully.

Preventing Falls

These tips can help prevent falls in your home:

- **Provide good lighting:**
 - Use light on all stairways.
 - Make sure light switches for rooms and stairs are easy to reach.
 - Use night lights in the pathways from bedroom to bathroom and kitchen.
- **Remove tripping hazards:**
 - Remove clutter and low-lying objects.
 - Remove raised door sills.
- **Secure floors and carpets:**
 - Use non-skid rugs on slippery floors.
 - Repair or replace worn, buckled, or curled carpets.
 - Use non-slip floor wax.
- **Adjust furniture:**
 - Arrange furniture to leave pathways clear.
 - Remove or avoid low chairs and armless chairs.
 - Adjust the bed height if it is too high or too low to get into or out of easily.
- **Make items easy to reach:**
 - Install shelves and cupboards at a height that is easy to reach.
 - Keep items you use often at waist height.
- **Make changes in the bathroom:**
 - Install grab bars in the tub, shower, and near the toilet.
 - Use a seat in the shower and tub.
 - Install non-skid strips or decals in the tub and shower.
 - Raise the toilet seat if it is too low, or install a safety frame.
- **Keep stairways and halls safe:**
 - Install handrails on both sides of the stairs.
 - Remove or tape down throw rugs and runners.
 - Repair loose and broken steps.
 - Install non-slip treads on steps.

Skin Care

After amputation, it is important to take good care of the skin on the part of your leg that remains. This is called your *residual limb*.

The skin care tips listed below will help keep your skin healthy. This is very important when you are planning to use a *prosthesis* (artificial limb).

After your incision has healed:

- Wash your residual limb each night:
 - Use unscented, dye-free soap (usually white or clear in color). Do **not** use anti-bacterial soap, unless your doctor tells you to.
 - Rinse well with clean water.
 - Avoid soaking your residual limb for long periods. Too much water can soften your skin and cause swelling.
 - Dry your skin by patting it with a clean towel. Do **not** rub.
 - Apply lotion as needed. Use dye-free and unscented products.
- Start massaging your leg early in your recovery. This will help it get used to being touched. As your leg heals, slowly increase the pressure you apply. This will toughen up your leg and get it ready for a prosthesis.
- At least once a day, inspect the skin of your leg for irritation, blisters, or red marks. Use a mirror to see all sides of your leg.
- To avoid skin irritation, do **not** shave your residual limb. Shaving can cause ingrown hairs and skin sores.

Follow-up Visits

You will be scheduled to meet with your surgeon within 1 to 2 weeks after you are discharged from the hospital. You will also be scheduled for weekly visits in the Rehabilitation Clinic for about 6 weeks.

After you get your prosthetic leg, you will have follow-up visits with your provider every 1 to 3 months. At these visits, your provider will assess the health of your residual limb, how well your prosthesis fits, and how well it works for you. Be sure to bring your prosthetic leg to your follow-up visits, even if it does not fit properly or you cannot wear it.

Support Group

We encourage you to attend the Harborview Medical Center Amputee Support Group. The group meets to talk about tips for actively living with limb loss. The meetings are a time when you can talk with others who are living with similar issues.

Meetings are open to amputees, their family and friends, and community members. They are held every Tuesday from 11 a.m. to 12 noon in 4West Hospital Room 73 on the Skybridge. For directions, ask staff at the information desk in the Ground West Lobby.

Activities

- **Returning to work.** The process of returning work after an amputation can be complex. If you want to return to work, your rehab doctor will help you come up with a plan.
- **Returning to driving.** Some people are able to drive again after amputation, but most need to have changes made to their car. Your doctor will talk with you about your safe return to driving.

Your Care Team

Rehabilitation Medicine Doctor

Your Rehabilitation Medicine doctor will work closely with you during your recovery. This doctor will monitor your healing process, help manage your pain, and make sure you are receiving the best therapies to support your recovery.

Your doctor will also help you taper off prescription pain medicines and use other medicines to manage your pain. When you are ready, your Rehab doctor will also order your prosthesis and supplies.

Prosthetics and Orthotics Team

While you are in the hospital, a *prosthetist* will meet with you. A prosthetist is a person who measures, designs, creates, fits, and services an artificial limb. Your prosthetist will teach you about prosthetics and answer any questions you have. If you have a cast, a member of the prosthetics team take care of your cast changes.

After your limb is fully healed, about 6 to 8 weeks after surgery, you may be ready to be fitted with a prosthesis. Your prosthetist will meet with you in the Rehabilitation Medicine Clinic or in their clinic to start this process. Your prosthesis will be custom-molded to your body and designed for your specific needs. It will take time and several visits to make your prosthesis.

Rehabilitation Nurse

During your clinic visits, your Rehabilitation nurse will help you with wound care, managing your medicines, and coordinating your care needs.

Physical Therapy

A *physical therapist* (PT) will meet with you while you are in the hospital. Your PT will teach you about exercises and equipment you can use to help you get around. Your PT will also help prepare you for using a prosthesis.

Many people with lower-limb amputations benefit from ongoing outpatient physical therapy to improve their strength, flexibility, balance, and mobility. A PT can also help train you to walk with a prosthesis.

Occupational Therapy

An *occupational therapist* (OT) will meet you while you are in the hospital. The OT will teach you about daily self-care and help you assess the safety of your home. They will also suggest home safety equipment for you to buy, if needed.

Psychology

If at any point you are having a hard time adjusting to your amputation, you will be referred to a Rehabilitation psychologist. This doctor can help you deal with the emotional effects of having an amputation.

When to Call

- You will need to see your prosthetist if you have:

- Problems with your prosthesis
- Skin issues caused by using your prosthesis

Call your usual prosthetist or call the Prosthetics and Orthotics Department at 206.598.4026 to set up a clinic visit.

- If you have other questions or concerns:

- Weekdays 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., call the Rehabilitation Medicine Clinic at 206.520.5000.
- After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.744.2500.

Questions?

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

Rehabilitation Medicine Clinic
at Harborview Medical Center:

Weekdays 8 am. to 4:30 p.m.,
call 206.520.5000.

After hours and on weekends
and holidays, call
206.744.2500.