

Spine Care Companion: Module 1

I just met my provider for my spine condition, what should I expect next?

This handout explains what to expect during recovery, treatment options, and stress management.

How quickly will I recover, and should I rest in recovery?

Spinal pain can be overwhelming, but it is important to know that most people do get better with time and treatment. However, there is not a set timeframe, as each person recovers differently. Recovery may be gradual, and there can be ups and downs. Many people report feeling better within the first few weeks.

Balancing Rest and Activity

At first, moving after an injury may be very painful. For this reason, you may want to spend time in a resting position that reduces the pain. This could be lying down, sitting, or standing. In the beginning, it is wise to avoid lifting heavy items.

But, the longer you are inactive, the more stiff you will feel. Continue to stay active despite your pain to help avoid unnecessary stiffness. Regular activity is an important part of recovery and rehabilitation. Talk to your provider or physical therapist (PT) about setting daily activity goals. Go slow, do small amounts of activity, and take breaks. Set a goal for the day and see if you can do a little more each day.

Pacing yourself is important. It is important to understand that moving is not likely to cause permanent damage as long as you follow your PT's or provider's guidelines. You may feel more pain and soreness at first, but this does not mean you have injured yourself further, in most cases.

Keeping good posture, body mechanics, and desk ergonomics will decrease stress on your spine. Being active early in recovery will help you regain function as soon as possible.

If you have not started to improve in the first few weeks, you should contact your spine care provider.

What are my treatment options?

There are many different options for treating spine pain. Not everyone responds equally to each treatment. You will most likely change treatment methods as you start recovering.

Passive Treatments

Passive treatments can help you be more comfortable and active, but these usually have temporary benefit. Examples of passive treatment include medication, massage, cold and heat therapy, acupuncture, electrical stimulation (TENS unit), and back braces. Another option is spinal manipulation provided by a chiropractor, physical therapist (PT), or osteopathic physician (DO). Passive treatments tend to be most effective when combined with some of the activities below.

- Placing ice on the areas of pain is usually recommended during the first few days after pain begins. After 4 to 5 days, start using heat. To avoid burning your skin, never place ice or heat directly on your skin. Place a towel between the ice or heat and your skin. Do not use ice packs or heat for more than 20 minutes.
- You may be able to take over-the-counter pain medicines such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. People often find these helpful for reducing their symptoms. Check with your provider first if you know you have kidney, liver, or stomach problems.
- If your provider prescribes medicines, they will usually recommend trying non-opioids first as they are safer and often just as effective.
- Never take more than the recommended dose of over-the-counter or prescription medicines without the advice of a medical professional. If you are unsure, please talk to a pharmacist or contact your provider's office.

Active Treatments

One of your first goals is to gradually transition from passive to *active treatments*. A few days after your pain starts, start active treatments such as light walking, stationary biking, or stretching. You may be referred to a PT who will provide you with exercises for your specific condition.

Exercise

Self-guided exercise is great once you become more mobile and comfortable. Many patients try yoga, Pilates, walking, aerobics, and swimming. Go slow, be gentle at first, and build up your activity. It is OK to feel a little discomfort or stretching when doing exercise. It is normal to feel sore after exercising when beginning an exercise routine.

What if I feel pain in recovery?

Back or neck pain may flare up in the early stages of recovery. If this happens, you can return to using passive treatments until your pain is under control.

Red Flags

It is best to avoid going to the Emergency Department unless you have specific symptoms known as “red flags.” These “red flags” are very uncommon but do require immediate medical attention. If you experience any of the following, immediately contact your provider, go to the Emergency Department, or call 911:

- Sudden change in bowel or bladder function – either unable to control or empty your bladder or have a bowel movement.
- Sudden loss of strength such as losing strength in your arm or tripping because you are not fully picking up your foot.
- Sudden loss of feeling, numbness, or pins and needles in your arm or leg.
- Fever along with back or neck pain.

Who is on my spine team and how do I reach them?

Your UW spine team may grow over time to include your primary care provider (PCP), a physiatrist, a PT, and other specialty providers based on your individual needs.

Receiving all your care within UW Medicine means that your spine team can access your electronic record and the most up-to-date information from your other UW care providers.

Understandably, it is not always possible to receive all your care within UW Medicine. If this is the case, make sure your team knows which healthcare providers you are working with outside of UW.

Your UW spine care team will guide you on your care journey and help you determine the best treatment options for your condition.

You can contact your care team through the MyChart app on your phone or computer. You can always call the clinic if you have an urgent concern.

How do I deal with the stress of having a spine problem?

It is understandable that pain can add more stress to your life. Pain often makes everyday activities more difficult. But, it is important that you manage your stress and take care of yourself so that you do not get overwhelmed by the pain.

Talk to your provider about your spine condition. A better understanding of your condition, including knowing that you may not have any serious problems, should help ease your anxiety.

Your usual stress management strategies may include exercises that now make your pain worse. If this is the case, try something new or modify your exercises. For example, can you walk instead of run? Can you temporarily reduce your distance? Try to find activities you enjoy that will help distract you from the pain.

If you need more help in managing your stress or pain, talk to your provider about a referral to a specialist, like a mental health therapist or clinical psychologist. They will understand the connection between pain and stress, and they can guide you with self-help strategies as you recover.

Questions?

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