

Exercises to help your recovery after abdominal surgery

Department of Physiotherapy

Information for Patients

Last reviewed: August 2024

Next review: August 2027

Leaflet number: 242 Version: 2

Introduction

The aim of this leaflet is to provide help and advice for patients after abdominal surgery. Not everyone will need to be seen regularly by a physiotherapist after their surgery. This leaflet will give you advice and exercises which you can do yourself to help with your recovery.

How do I minimise the risk of a chest infection whilst I'm recovering?

After your surgery your lungs are recovering from the general anaesthetic you had, and you will most likely have pain from your surgical wounds. This will make it difficult for you to take deep breaths and cough effectively, which can cause phlegm to build up on your lungs. Deep breathing, coughing and moving about after surgery will help clear any phlegm that builds up and minimise the risk of developing a chest infection.

It is important to start to clear your chest as soon as possible after your operation. Coughing will not cause any damage to your wound area.

If you are in pain, use your pain relief button (if you have one while in hospital). If this is not helping, you can ask nursing staff for more pain relief. It is very important that your pain is managed and does not limit your ability to breath deeply, cough and move around.

Follow the advice on the next page for deep breathing, coughing and moving around.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

Deep breathing exercises:

1. Relax your shoulders and upper chest.
2. Take a slow, quiet, deep breath in through your nose.
3. Hold your breath for at least 3 seconds.
4. Breath out slowly through your mouth or nose.
5. Repeat the above steps 3 to 4 times i.e. take 3 to 4 deep breaths in a row.

You should do your deep breathing exercises frequently (at least every half hour).

Start as soon as you return to the ward from your operation.

Coughing:

Coughing is the normal way to clear phlegm from your lungs. You will need to do this regularly after your operation.

To help you cough, support your wound firmly with a pillow or towel; this should ease the discomfort from the wound site.

Alternatively, you can loosen any phlegm by doing a 'huff' (a forced breath out with an open mouth).

Sitting out of bed:

Aim to try and get yourself on your feet as soon as possible; this will help your recovery. Gentle activity will help to get your gut to start working again and helps your circulation.

Staff will help you get out of bed on the first day of the operation. They will continue to help you until you are able to do this yourself. Drips, drains and other attachments should not prevent you from getting out of bed.

You should gradually increase the time spent out of bed as you start to recover.

Start walking as an exercise when you are able to:

Walking is the best exercise after your operation. Ward staff will assist you with this until you are able to manage by yourself. Once you are able, it will be your responsibility to make sure you are walking regularly and gradually increasing the distance you walk.

You may feel weak and tired when you first start; this is a normal response to surgery and does get better with time. On average, patients are able to move around by themselves 3 to 5 days after their operation. Regular short walks are a better approach to conserve your energy and build up your fitness.

You will not routinely practice going up and down the stairs before going home, unless you are concerned about managing them at home.

What exercises should I do after my operation?

Below is a selection of exercises you can do to prevent you getting stiff and to help you maintain your strength.

Leg exercises:

Ankle pumps:

Bend your ankles up and down.
Repeat 10 times.



Knee squeeze:

Tighten your thigh by squeezing your knee down into the bed.
Hold for 3 seconds.
Repeat 5 times.



Straight leg raise:

Keeping your knee straight, lift your leg about 10 inches off the bed.
Hold for 3 seconds.
Repeat 5 times. Keep control throughout.



Seated knee extension:

Sit on the edge of the bed.
Pull your toes up, tighten your thigh muscles and straighten your knee.
Lower your leg slowly.
Repeat 5 times.



Tummy (abdominal) exercises:

Start all tummy (abdominal) exercises lying with your head on a pillow, your knees bent and your feet flat on the bed. Aim to do each exercise 5 times, at least 3 times a day.

Pelvic tilting:

Place your hand in the hollow of your back.

Tighten your tummy muscles, flatten your lower back onto your hands and tilt your bottom up and back towards your chest.

Breathe normally throughout. Hold for 3 seconds and release gently.



Knee rolling:

Lying with your knees bent and together, tighten your tummy muscles and rock your knees out from side to side.

This may help release trapped wind.



What should I do when I get home?

Your recovery truly starts when you leave hospital. Try and get into a routine as soon as possible but be aware you will probably get tired more quickly than normal, so aim to break up the day and have plenty of rest periods. Some days will be better than others, so remember not to overdo it. Gradually start to build up your strength and stamina, and aim to increase the distance you walk each day.

Within a couple of weeks, aim to start doing some light chores such as making meals and dusting, but remember to avoid heavy lifting. Around 4 to 6 weeks after your operation, your tummy muscles will begin to regain their strength. By 6 weeks aim to be walking for 30 to 45 minutes every day.

At the 6 week mark you should be ready to begin more physical chores such as vacuuming, and after 12 weeks you should hopefully be back to your normal self.

You can discuss getting back to more physical forms of exercise with your physiotherapist, surgeon or GP.

You should not drive for at least 6 weeks after surgery. You will need to check this with your insurance company to make sure you are covered. By the time you are considering driving, you should be able to concentrate, move freely within the driving seat and be able to comfortably perform an emergency stop.

