

# Physiotherapy advice after abdominal surgery

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## Advice, exercises and what to expect after your abdominal operation

This leaflet has been written to give you greater understanding of how you can support your recovery after your operation by doing certain exercises and avoiding things that might adversely affect your recovery. It may not answer all your questions so if you have any further concerns, please do not hesitate to ask your nurse or doctor.

**Walking, deep breathing and circulation exercises will play an important part in your recovery process and these should be started as soon as possible after your operation.**

## After your operation

Whilst in bed after your operation, it is important not to slump down as this restricts your chest expansion and air cannot get to the bottom of your lungs.

The general anaesthetic you have had affects your lungs, and together with the pain from your wound, makes taking a deep breath and coughing difficult. This means that thick mucus can collect in your lungs. Deep breathing, coughing and moving around after your surgery are important to help clear any mucus and prevent you from developing a chest infection.

It is important that you start to clear any mucus as soon as possible after your surgery. It may be uncomfortable but you will not do any damage to your stitches or staples. If you are in any pain, use your pain button if you have one or ask your nurse for more pain relief.

**It is vitally important that you are comfortable enough to deep breathe, cough and move. If you cannot, you must tell someone.**

## Breathing exercises

To reduce the effects of a general anaesthetic, practice the following exercises hourly throughout the day.

These exercises can be performed sitting up in bed, or preferably in a chair.

### Deep breathing exercises



Relax your shoulders and upper chest. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose to fill up the bottom of your lungs, hold for a few seconds and then breathe out through your mouth. This should be done five times every hour.

### Huffing

Take a deep breath in, and then breathe out quickly and forcefully through your mouth as if you were steaming up a window. This will help loosen any phlegm if needed.

### Coughing

Coughing is the normal way to clear mucus from your lungs. You will need to do this more often in the first few days following your operation.

To make this more comfortable for you after your surgery and to strengthen your cough, you can use a rolled-up towel or pillow to apply some gentle pressure and support over the area of your wound.

## Getting out of bed and walking

One of the best things you can do after your operation to aid your recovery is to get out of bed as soon as possible. This will help prevent a chest infection, but will also help your gut to start working again and maintain your circulation.

The nursing staff or physiotherapist will help you to do this on the morning after your operation (or even the same day of the operation for some people). They will continue to help you until you are able to do it by yourself. Drips and drains can be moved with you and will not prevent you from getting out of bed.

On each day after your operation it is advised that you sit out for at least six to eight hours in total, with rests in between and regular walks. Some weakness and tiredness is to be expected but it is important to try and do a little more each day.

Your physiotherapist will help you to practice and improve your walking until you are able to walk safely by yourself. Once you can do so, you will then be responsible for walking regularly on the ward until you go home. If you have any stairs at home, and are concerned about how you may manage them, the physiotherapist can practice these with you whilst you are in hospital.

**To get out of bed**, bend both knees and roll onto your side by moving your shoulders and knees together. As you lower your feet to the floor, use your arms to push yourself into a sitting position on the side of the bed.

## Circulatory exercises

There are some simple exercises that you can do to help improve the circulation in your legs whilst you are not quite as active as normal. These can be done either lying in bed or sitting in your chair.

### Ankles

Bend and stretch the ankles up and down firmly and quickly (repeat 10 times).



### Knees

In bed – pull up your toes towards you, then push the back of your knee down into the bed. Hold for five seconds then relax. Repeat five times on each leg.

Sitting in a chair – straighten your knee out in front of you. Hold for five seconds then relax. Repeat five times on each leg.

### Buttocks

Tighten your buttocks regularly to relieve pressure from your bottom (repeat five times).

## Abdominal exercises

**Start all exercises by lying with your head on a pillow, knees bent and a shoulder-width apart, feet flat on the bed.**

### 1. Abdominal exercise

Gently place your hands on your lower tummy. Breathe in through your nose and as you breathe out, gently pull your tummy away from your hands towards your back. Feel the muscles tighten, try to hold for a count of three and then relax. Breathe in and out normally.



### 2. Pelvic tilting

Place your hands in the hollow of your back. Tighten your tummy muscles (Exercise 1), flatten your lower back onto your hands and tilt your bottom. Breathe normally. Hold for three seconds and release gently.



### 3. Knee rolling

Tighten your tummy muscles (Exercise 1) and gently lower both knees to one side as far as is comfortable. Bring them back to the middle and relax. Repeat to the other side.



**Do each of these exercises three times a day and repeat each one five times. Do more repetitions as you feel able.**

**Discontinue the exercises if they cause you any pain and seek advice from your physiotherapist.**

## Posture and back care

It is very important to be aware of your posture and take special care for about six weeks after your surgery. A good posture will help to prevent backache.

### Sitting

Sit upright in a supportive chair, if possible, with both feet on the floor. Do not slouch. You may find it helpful to place a small cushion or rolled towel in the small of your back.

### Standing or walking

Avoid holding your tummy with your hands and slouching forwards. Stand upright with shoulders back, keep bottom and tummy tucked in.

### Lifting

**Do not lift heavy objects for at least six weeks.** When you need to lift or pick something up, bend your knees and keep your back straight. Hold larger objects close to your body.

If you have any back pain after your operation, seek further advice from your physiotherapist or GP.

## Before you go home

The need for continued pain relief at home is very individual. Please discuss this with your nurse. If you have any worries or concerns, please talk to the ward physiotherapist or nursing staff.

## Advice on discharge

### Exercises

Continue with your exercises for at least six weeks, preferably three months, if you are returning to a physical job.

## Rest

Your body is using energy to heal itself so you will feel more tired than normal. Do not try to do too much too soon, and allow yourself some rest time each day to aid your recovery. You will feel better some days than others, this is normal.

## Walking

Try to walk for about five to 10 minutes at least once a day. Hills and stairs are quite safe but build up speed and distance gradually. Walking is a very valuable exercise; try to increase your walking time and distance each week.

## Driving

Check with your consultant and insurance company, but do not expect to drive for about four to six weeks, depending on your surgery. Make sure you can wear a seatbelt comfortably and perform manoeuvres and an emergency stop without undue pain.

## Work and sports

Always get approval from your doctor to return to work.

Gradually build up your level of physical activity.

Also get approval to return to your normal exercise routine e.g. swimming, cycling, aerobics and other sports.

## Gardening

Avoid gardening for a few weeks. Start slowly.

## Household activities

### Do's

Independent personal hygiene; light housework; making drinks; washing and drying dishes; preparing light meals.

### Don'ts

Decorating; heavy lifting; shaking the duvet or heavy bedding; cooking a large meal using the oven; heavy housework; gardening; D.I.Y.

You may need practical help with some tasks from family and friends.

If you are not as able or as independent as you were prior to your operation, you might also see an occupational therapist whilst you are in hospital who will assess your home circumstances. Your therapists may then consider referring you for ongoing rehabilitation with your local community therapy team. If you have any concerns about managing at home, please discuss them with any of the nursing staff or therapists.

## Further information

Take things slowly. Be very careful for the first six weeks after your operation. Gradually build up activity over the next six weeks until you feel able to resume your normal lifestyle.

## PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern, please contact:

PALS Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter

- call 01392 402093 or email [rduh.pals-eastern@nhs.net](mailto:rduh.pals-eastern@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital in Wonford, Exeter.

PALS North Devon

- call 01271 314090 or email [rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net](mailto:rduh.pals-northern@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at the North Devon District Hospital in Barnstaple.

## Have your say

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Tell us about your experience of our services. Share your feedback on the Care Opinion website [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk).

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