

Advice following your operation on your abdomen (tummy)

This factsheet provides information and advice to help your recovery from your operation. Your rate of recovery will vary according to your type of surgery, age, previous fitness and other treatments you are undergoing.

This information applies to both abdominal surgery and to those who have had pelvic exenteration surgery. Please ask a member of the physiotherapy or nursing staff if there is anything you do not understand or if you need further information.

Wearing an abdominal binder

If an abdominal binder is required, your physiotherapist will discuss this with you and provide it for when you first mobilise out of bed after your operation. The surgical team will advise you when to stop wearing this.

Flap reconstruction

If you have had a flap reconstruction you will likely need a specialised cushion for periods of sitting. If required, we will provide this for you whilst at The Royal Marsden. On discharge from hospital, the Plastic Surgery team will give you a cushion to take home with you.

Using your bladder and bowel / going to the toilet

This might not apply to you if you have a stoma formed as a result of surgery. In this case, a stoma nurse will speak to you during your inpatient stay about managing your stoma.

For a few days after your operation you may have a catheter draining urine from your bladder. Once it is removed and you first attempt to pass urine, sit comfortably on the toilet with your feet on the ground. Relax and allow plenty of time to empty your bladder.

When opening your bowels, it may be helpful to lean forward and to rest your feet on a small step or stool (4–6 inches high). Avoid straining, as this will put pressure on your wound. It may help to breathe out as you pass urine or open your bowels. Drinking plenty of fluids and walking may help to prevent constipation.

Recovering your strength and increasing your level of activity

It is important to become more active. However, you must recognise that these are **guidelines** and you should go at your own pace. Continue to take your painkillers, as prescribed, so that you are able to move around easily, breathe deeply or cough. The general rule is to go gently for the first six weeks after your operation while your wound and muscles have time to heal. You should lift nothing heavier than 1kg (equivalent to a bag of sugar). Try to maintain good posture when sitting, standing



and walking. Brace your tummy muscles, bend your knees, keep your back straight and hold the object close to you. Always stop lifting if you notice any pain. Avoid long periods of stooping or sitting slumped in a chair as this may cause back pain later on.

First 4 weeks at home: For the first few days once you get home, try to alternate periods of gentle activity, such as walking around, climbing stairs or walking outside, with resting on a chair or in bed. Don't be surprised if you continue to feel tired - rest when you need to.

Weeks 4–6 at home: Aim to gradually increase your activity. You may start carrying out daily tasks such as ironing, cooking, hanging out washing and making the bed. You can start low impact exercises such as hill walking, gentle dancing and swimming (if your wound has fully healed.) Try not to overdo it and rest when required.

Weeks 6–12 at home: You may start to carry out more strenuous activities such as light jogging, cycling, badminton and other non-contact sports. Aim to gradually increase your activity as described above. Each day try to increase the pace and distance that you walk, without increasing any discomfort or becoming over tired.

By week 12 you should be at a similar level to how you were before your operation, but remember that recovery varies for each person.

Aim to gradually increase your activity as described above. Each day try to increase the pace and distance that you walk, without increasing any discomfort or becoming over tired. Remember that recovery varies for each person. Your post-operative exercises are described in The Royal Marsden factsheet *Exercises for your abdominal (tummy) muscles and lower back*.

Leisure and sport

You may be able to resume swimming after six weeks if your scar has healed. Competitive sport and high impact activities should be avoided for at least 12 weeks.

Discuss your individual needs at your outpatient clinic appointment. When you do resume, start slowly and build up exercise gradually. If you have difficulties, stop and seek advice.

If you need further advice, please contact the physiotherapy department (see contact details on page 3).

Returning to work

Allow at least six weeks before returning to work. You will need to consider your particular level of recovery, your occupation and the effects of any other treatment. Discuss your own situation at your outpatient clinic appointment.

Driving

You may resume driving from about six weeks, once you are able to move freely, can perform an emergency stop, concentrate sufficiently and tolerate the pressure of the seat belt over your wound. Check that your insurance is valid after major surgery before you resume driving.

Resuming sexual relationships

This is a very personal and individual issue and it is difficult to give general advice. Many aspects of your illness and its treatment will affect the way you feel both physically and emotionally. If you are



concerned or have any questions, do not hesitate to talk these through with your doctor or clinical nurse specialist, who can refer you to our psycho-sexual nurse.

Contact details

Physiotherapy Department

Chelsea 020 7808 2821 (answer phone)

Sutton 020 8661 3098 (answer phone)

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899

(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Sources of information and support

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

Telephone: 020 7306 6666

Website: www.csp.org.uk

The CSP can provide information on NHS and private physiotherapists with a special interest in cancer care and women's health. They also produce public information leaflets.

Macmillan Cancer Support

Freephone: 0808 808 0000

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and can signpost you to local cancer support groups and organisations near you.

Cancer Research UK

Freephone: 0808 800 4040 (to speak to a cancer nurse)

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

CRUK provides information on different cancers including symptoms, screening and treatment. There are also tools on coping with cancer and the option to speak with a trained cancer nurse.

Information in this factsheet is adapted *Fit following surgery* with kind permission of Pelvic Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy

