

# Thoracic Lumbar Fusion Surgery

*A guide for patients and their caregivers*



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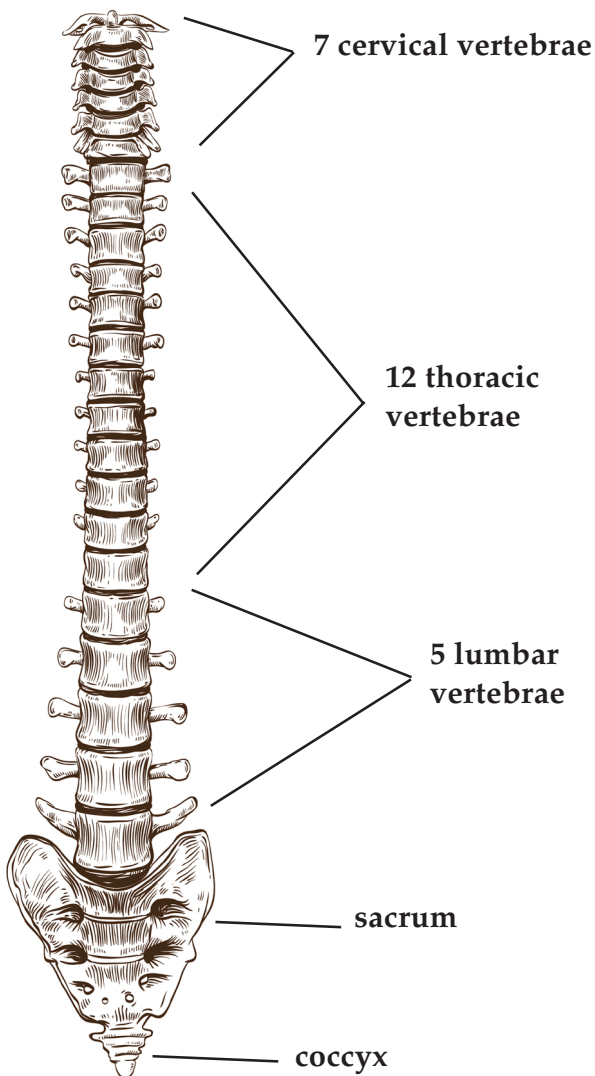
# About the Spine

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The spine is a stack of bones that runs down the middle of your back. It starts at the bottom of your skull and ends at the bottom of your tailbone. The spine:

- supports your body
- allows you to move freely
- houses and protects the spinal cord—the nerve center of your body.

## View of the spine from the front



## The spine has 26 bones in all

- There are 24 bones (vertebrae) that start at the top of your spine. These are the separate bones that connect like puzzle pieces. There are:
  - 7 vertebrae in the neck area (cervical)
  - 12 vertebrae in the chest area (thoracic)
  - 5 vertebrae in the lower back (lumbar)
- The next to the last bone of your spine is the sacrum. The sacrum is actually 1 large bone made of 5 fused bones.
- The bone at the very end of the spine is the tailbone (the coccyx).

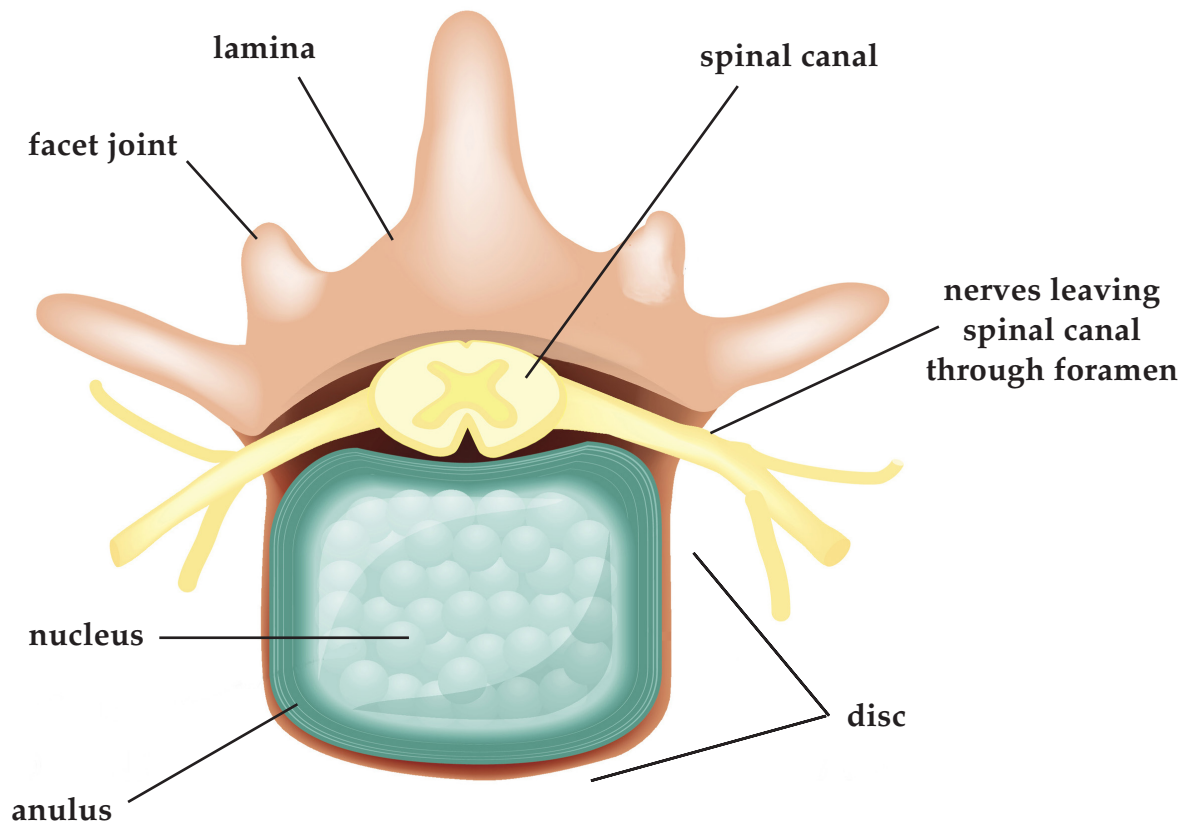
## There are discs between most of the bones in the spine

There are soft pads of tissue between most of the vertebrae in your spine. These are called discs. The only vertebrae that do not have a disc between them are the top 2.

### *Details about the discs*

- Each disc has a spongy center (nucleus) and a tougher outer ring (annulus). Movement in the nucleus is what makes it possible for the vertebrae to rock back and forth on the disks. This give you the flexibility you need to bend and move.
- The discs absorb shock caused by movement.
- The discs also keep the bones from rubbing up against each other when you move.

### Cross-section of a vertebra and disc



## The spine has 3 natural curves

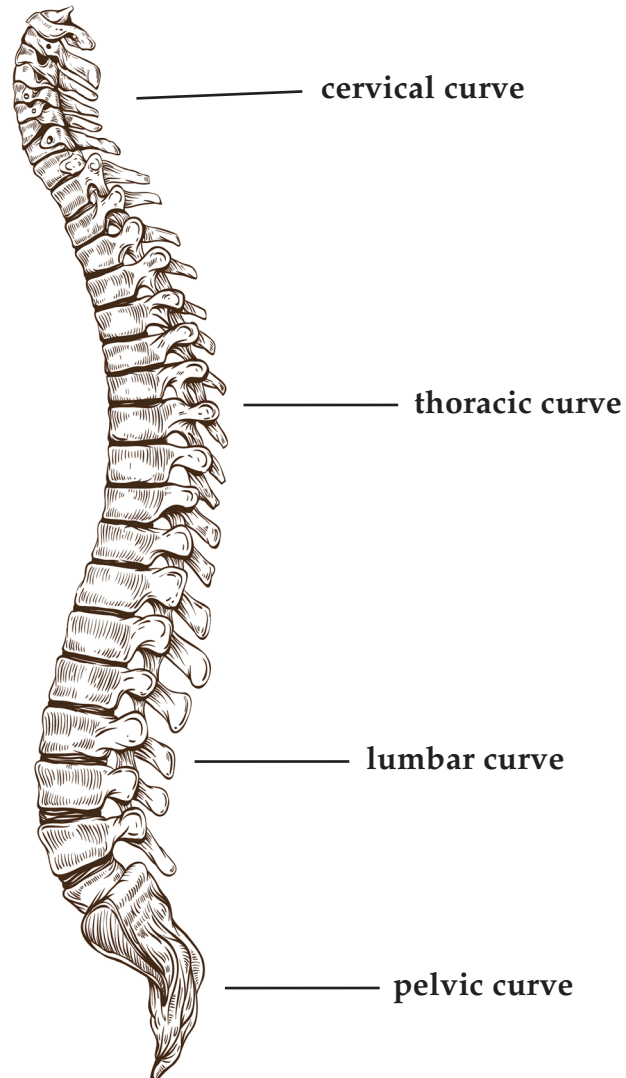
A healthy spine with proper alignment has 3 natural curves: cervical, thoracic, and lumbar.

- These curves keep your body balanced.
- These curves support your body when you move.
- These curves distribute weight through the spine, making back injuries less likely.

## Muscles support the curves of the spine

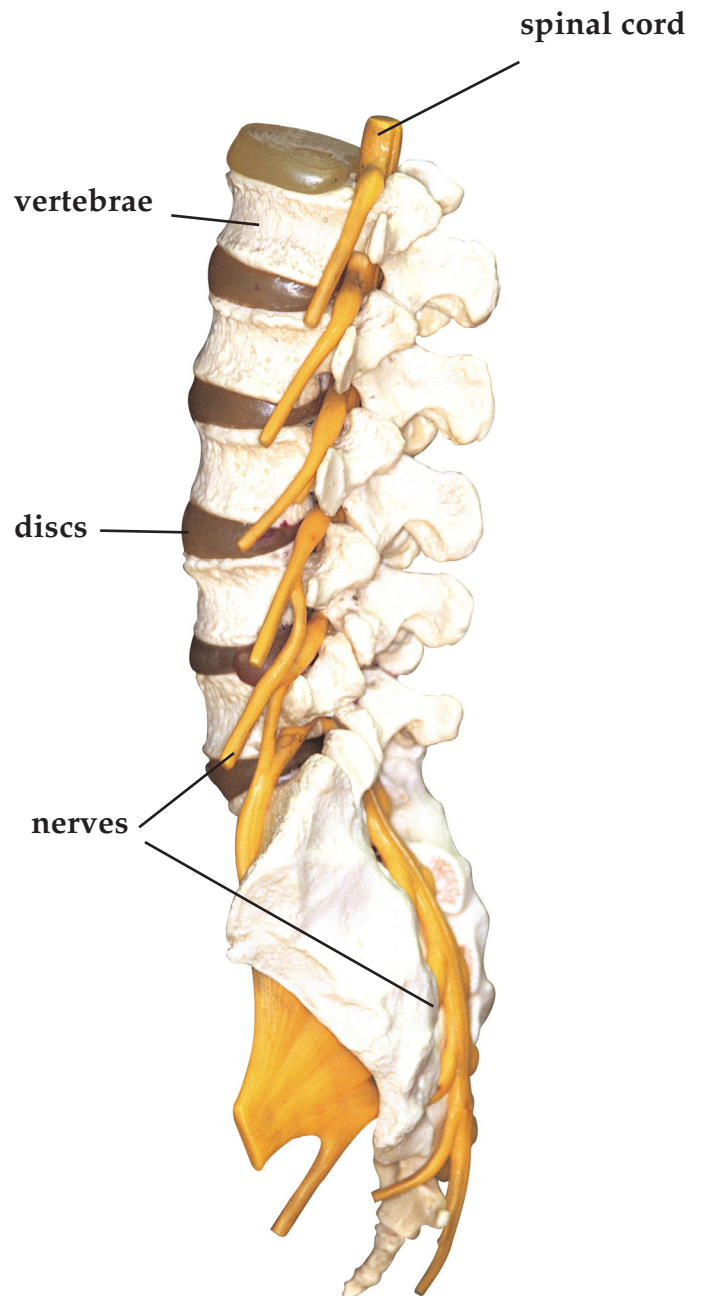
Strong, flexible back muscles help support the curves of your spine. They do this by holding the vertebrae and discs in correct alignment. Strong and flexible belly, hip, and leg muscles also help support your back.

### View of the spine from the side



## The spinal cord runs through the middle of your spine

- The spinal cord is the nerve center of your body.
  - It runs through the center of your spine.
  - It connects your brain to the rest of your body.
  - It starts at the base of your brain and usually ends at the first or second lumbar vertebrae.
- All along the spine and at the end of the spine are nerve roots.
  - Nerve roots exit and enter the spinal canal on both the left and right sides and the end of the spine.
  - The job of the nerve roots is to carry electrical signals back and forth between the spinal cord and the muscles, organs, and other parts of your body.



# About This Surgery

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## Why do I need spinal fusion surgery?

Your spinal nerves or nerve roots are being squeezed or compressed. This may be the cause of different types of problems you're having. These problems might include back pain and weakness, or numbness in your legs. More serious symptoms include problems with bowel or bladder function.

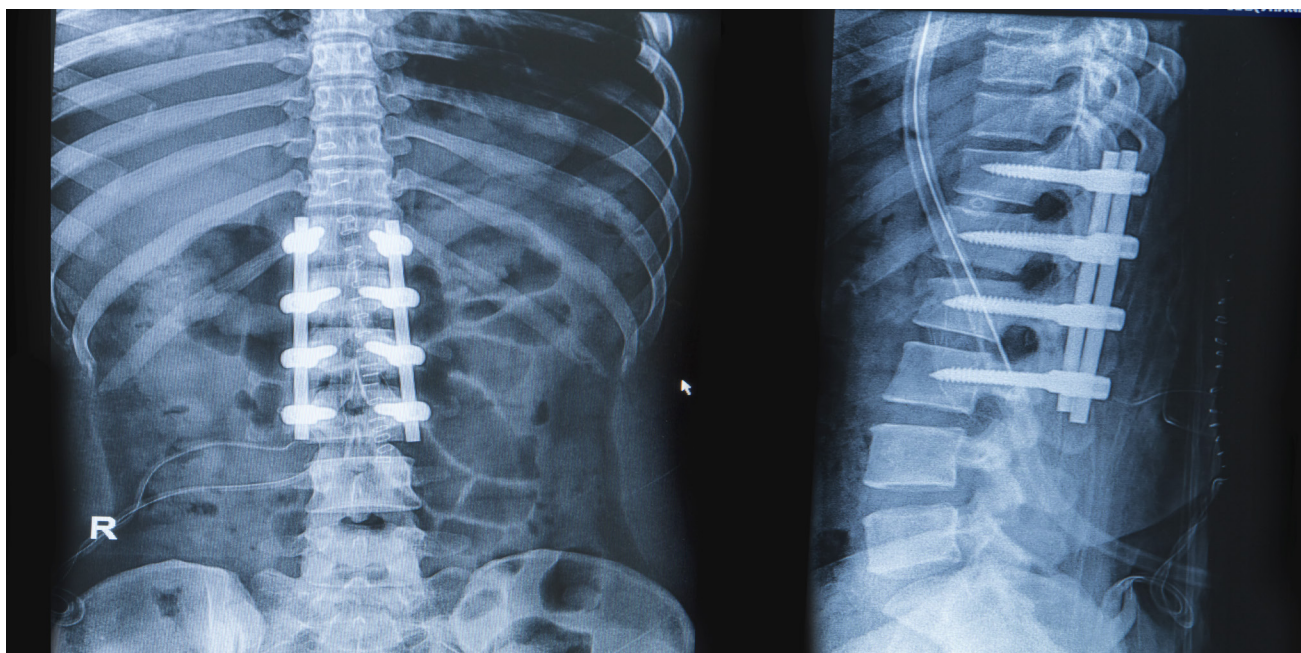
## How does a spinal fusion work?

During a spinal fusion, 2 or more of the bones in your spine are joined or "welded" together. Bones are joined with bones grafts. Your surgeon may also use instruments to hold the bones in place. Bones are fused to limit how much they move. This may help to lower your pain or fix other problems you are having. The part of the spine that is fused and how many bones will be joined depends on the problems you're having.

## *Parts of the spine that may be fused:*

- vertebrae in the neck (cervical fusion)
- vertebrae in the mid-back (thoracic fusion)
- vertebrae in the lower back (lumbar fusion).

Fusion can be done from the front or back side of the body. Your surgeon will decide which is best for you.



## How are the bones fused together?

Fusions are made with bone grafts and with or without instrumentation. Your surgeon will remove one or more discs from between your vertebrae. Then your surgeon will replace the disc(s) with bone. This will allow the vertebrae to fuse together as one. You may have a titanium plate and screws placed to hold the bone in place as it fuses.

## How do bone grafts work?

To fuse the spine, very small pieces of extra bone are needed. This is called a bone graft. The bone that is attached to the spine acts like a “cement” that fuses the vertebrae together. The fusion stops motion between the two fused vertebrae. After your fusion, you’ll have a slight loss in flexibility, but you may feel like you can move better after surgery because your problem has been fixed.

## Are there different kinds of bone grafts?

There are many different types of bone grafts. Two of the more common types are grafts from a patient’s own body (autograft) and grafts from a bone bank (allograft). There are also artificial bone graft materials that can be used.

### *Autografts*

At Vanderbilt, bone from your own spine will always be used to join your vertebrae together. Your surgeon may also need to use bone from your hip to make the fusion. If bone from your hip is used, your surgeon will take a small amount from the top part of your pelvic bone.

The bone that is used for the graft will be removed during your spinal fusion surgery. You will not need a separate procedure. Your surgeon will talk with you about all of this before surgery.

### *Allografts*

Sometimes bone from people who have died is also used to fuse the vertebrae together. This bone is collected, tested, and stored in bone banks. Bone donors are checked for their cause of death and medical history. Tests are done to check for viruses such as HIV and hepatitis.

The bone is also treated before it is used as a graft. The risk of getting a disease from this type of bone graft is extremely low. Your surgeon will talk with you if they decide to use bone from a donor in addition to your own bone.

### *Genetically engineered protein (BMP) grafts*

A genetically engineered protein (BMP) may also be used create your fusion. The use of BMP will be discussed with you if your surgeon feels this would be helpful in your situation.

## How do the bone grafts stay in place?

### *Spinal fusions with instrumentation*

A bone graft takes time to completely grow into the bone and become stable. Most fusions include the use of instruments to hold the bones in place while the graft fuses together. In a cervical fusion, your surgeon attaches a plate and screws in your vertebrae. They’re placed in a way that will keep the spine stable while it heals. The plate and screws are generally made of titanium.



### ***Spinal fusions without instrumentation***

Sometimes doctors will decide to do cervical spinal fusions without plates and screws. These fusions only use the bone grafts. This means your surgeon will join your bones together by using nothing other than added bone graft material. This might be the case for you if you're having a cervical discectomy and fusion.

### **What are the benefits of a spinal fusion?**

Most people have back surgery to lessen the pain and symptoms that are caused by their back problems. Some benefits of a successful spinal fusions include:

- less pain in the back and legs
- less weakness or numbness in the legs
- the ability to be more active and gain a better quality of life
- improved physical fitness
- better mood
- increased productivity, including being able to return to work or other activities.

### **What are the risks of a spinal fusion?**

Like any surgery, a spinal fusion has its risks. However, your surgeon would not recommend this procedure for you unless the expected benefits far outweighed the risks.

#### ***Risk of bad pain after surgery***

Expect to have pain after surgery. This can be a very painful procedure. For a while, every movement you make will send sensation into the muscles in your back. Patients have used words such as "I feel like I've been beaten up."

Often, patients will notice they have pain in areas besides their backs, as well as pain that is new and different than the kind they had before surgery. This pain is probably caused by your body being in an awkward position during surgery. The good news is that this pain will go away. The worst pain typically lasts for 2 to 4 weeks. After that, the rest of your pain will slowly go away. It's possible that you'll have some pain that lasts for as long as 3 to 6 months.

#### ***Other minor risks of a spinal fusion***

In addition to pain, spine surgery has other minor risks. These are easily treated and will not affect your long-term recovery. We cannot predict every possible thing that may happen.

The most common minor risks are:

- muscle soreness, spasms, and painful pressure areas, especially in the chest
- skin numbness on your back where your incision is
- wound infection on the surface of your skin
- bladder infection
- constipation or difficulty in having a bowel movement
- nerve irritation, such as pain, numbness, and weakness that comes and goes
- pain that is new and different than the kind you had before your surgery
- blood clots in your legs
- spinal fluid leak or a dural tear
- breathing and lung problems
- confusion from anesthesia or pain medicine.

### Major risks of a spinal fusion

Major risks of spinal fusion are very rare but include:

- neurologic problems, up to and including paralysis
- blood clots that travel to your lungs (called pulmonary embolism)
- Deep wound infection that requires surgery or IV antibiotics
- failure of the bones to fuse together (called pseudarthrosis) or instrumentation that breaks or pulls out of the bone
- other major medical problems, including stroke, heart attack, and even death.



### Risks of anesthesia

The goal of general anesthesia is to make you sleep through your surgery and not feel any pain. General anesthesia is different from regional anesthesia, where only part of your body is numbed and you may be awake.

Risks of general anesthesia include:

- throat discomfort
- injury to teeth or dental work
- harm to the eyes, including blindness
- damage to your vocal cords, which may affect your ability to speak
- headache
- backache
- nerve damage
- being aware during surgery
- allergic reactions
- stroke
- heart attack
- death.

Your anesthesiologist will talk with you in detail about the risks of anesthesia during your pre-surgery appointment.

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*You'll have general anesthesia during your surgery.*  
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# Getting Ready for Surgery

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There are things you'll need to know and do to get ready for your surgery. Let us know if you have any questions or need any help.

## Fill out and return all the medical forms we give you

The surgery scheduler will give you forms to fill out. These forms will ask for information about you, your personal and medical history, and your current living situation. Fill them out and return all of these forms to us right away.

## Get your teeth cleaned

Get your teeth cleaned before your surgery. You will not be able to have dental work or teeth cleaning for 6 months after surgery.

## Get your vaccines

Plan ahead. If you need to get a live-virus vaccine and your surgery is still more than 6 weeks away, you should have your vaccines now. Though you can get a flu shot with an inactivated virus at any time, you cannot get any live-virus vaccines within 6 weeks of your surgery or for 3 months after your surgery.

## Go to your pre-anesthesia appointment

You'll have an appointment to meet with a member of your anesthesia team before your surgery. They'll talk to you about anesthesia and what to expect. They may give you medicine that you'll need to take by mouth on the morning of your surgery.

## Go to your appointment at HiRise or VPEC

Before your surgery, you will come to Vanderbilt for what is called a HiRise or VPEC appointment. This is a very important appointment: do not miss it.

At this visit:

- you'll bring a list of all the medicines you take, including herbal medicines and those you buy without a prescription
- you'll bring any medicines that are hard to fill and may not be available at the hospital
- you'll give some blood for testing
- you may give some of your urine for testing
- you'll find out what medicines you should not take on the morning of your surgery
- you'll talk with an anesthesia nurse practitioner. Be sure to tell this person if you drink alcohol regularly.

## Go to any appointments or have tests done if we require them

Before your surgery, you may need to have tests, including a urinalysis, blood work, an EKG, and a chest X-ray. If necessary, all of these tests will be scheduled for you and will be done during pre-testing when you meet with the anesthesia staff.

If it has been some time since you saw your primary provider and you have a lot of medical problems, it would be best that you see your doctor before your pre-test date.

## If you smoke, quit!

DO NOT smoke any time around your surgery — before or after. This includes e-cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and anything else that has nicotine.

Smoking increases the risk of having medical problems from surgery. Some of these problems include the risk of infection in the instrumentation used in your spine and the risk that your bones and incisions won't heal.

## Call us if you get any kind of infection

If you get any kind of infection before your surgery, you need to call the surgery scheduler right away. An infection could move into your spine after surgery and cause serious problems. If you still have infection the day of your surgery, your surgery will need to be cancelled in order to keep you safe and healthy.

### ***Call us if you develop:***

- an infection of your teeth
- an infection of your fingernails or toenails
- a bladder infection
- a pimple, cut, scratch, boil, abscess, or insect bite anywhere on your body—especially on the skin over or around the area of your back that will be operated on
- a rash or flaky skin
- a temperature higher than 100.5 F (38.1 C).

## Exercise to stay strong

The stronger and more fit you are before surgery, the better you will do after. Activities we suggest are walking, swimming and deep breathing exercises. Cardiac and aerobic exercises are also helpful if they're approved by your medical doctor and you're able to do them. You may want to work with a physical therapist or personal trainer to get as strong as you can.

## Eat healthy foods to stay strong

Include fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in your diet. A healthy diet will help you have a better recovery.

## Start planning for your recovery at home

Patients get better faster when they go home to recover since it's helpful to heal in familiar surroundings. Unless occupational and physical therapy tell us you need to go to a rehab facility, you'll go to your home after surgery. Start getting your home ready now, and make your recovery as easy as it can be.

## Make your home safe and easy to move around in

Remember, as you recover you will not be able to bend, lift, twist, or stoop down. You'll be very limited in your movement after surgery and need to prepare your home for this.

- Make sure you have a cordless phone or cell phone that you can reach easily.
- Cook and freeze meals in advance. Or buy frozen dinners and canned fruits and vegetables. This way, you won't have to worry about doing a lot of cooking.

- Buy heavy or awkward things now before your surgery. This might include dish soaps, detergents, toilet paper, peanut butter, pet food, and heavy jars or cans.
- Store the kitchen items you use the most at counter-top level, so they are above your waist and below your shoulders.

### Arrange your home to prevent falls

For the first few weeks after surgery, you'll likely need to use a walker or cane (or both). Move your furniture so you have a clear path and will be able to use your walker or cane wherever you need to go.

- Pick up all clutter off the floor so you don't trip or hurt yourself.
- Remove any area rugs in your home so you won't trip over them.
- Tape down all electrical cords so you don't trip over them.
- Put shower grab bars in the shower, and put rubber mats in the bathtub and shower. More falls happen in the bathroom than any other room in the house.
- Consider installing handrails on stairs in or outside of your house before your surgery.
- If your bedroom is on an upper-level floor, think about setting up a bed on the first floor of your home to use as you recover.
- Keep the items you use often within easy reach.
- Get a rolling cart to help you move items without having to carry them.
- If you have pets, make arrangements to get help feeding and taking care of them since your movement will be so limited.

### Arrange for a caregiver

It's important that you have one or more caregivers to help you as you recover. Now is the time to ask family, friends, or others you know if they can help you once you leave the hospital. You will need help with housework, errands, and driving. Remember that you will not be able to drive for while. We'll let you know at your follow up appointment when you can drive. You also will not be able to drive for as long as you are taking your prescription pain medicines.

After surgery, you'll need help with:

- getting to and from the hospital, physical therapy, and doctor appointments
- going to the bathroom and showering
- grocery shopping and meals
- keeping the house clean and safe for you to walk in
- caring for small children and pets.

For the first 2 weeks after surgery, it's best if someone can stay with you at all times.



.....  
*Cook and freeze meals before you have surgery.*  
 .....

## 14 days before surgery

Stop drinking any beer, wine, liquor, and all other alcohol drinks.

## 7 days before surgery

Stop taking the medicines listed here. Taking the wrong medicine too close to surgery can keep you from having your surgery. It could also cause complications.

**Important:** If one of your doctors thinks it is not safe for you to stop any of these medicines, you must talk to the surgeon!

### *7 days before surgery, stop taking these prescription medicines:*

- blood thinners, such as Coumadin, Eliquis, Plavix, and Persantine
- all anti-inflammatory prescriptions, such as Clinoril, Indocin, Daypro, Celebrex, and Vioxx.

If you take insulin or steroids you may have to adjust your medicines before surgery. Make sure to tell your surgeon about all the medicines you're currently taking.

### *7 days before surgery, stop taking these over-the-counter medicines:*

- aspirin
- ibuprofen
- Advil
- Motrin
- Aleve
- Naprosyn (naproxen)
- any other medicines that contain aspirin, ibuprofen, or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (called NSAIDs) that you can buy with or without a prescription.

### *7 days before surgery, stop taking these herbals and supplements:*

- chondroitin
- danshen
- feverfew
- fish oil
- garlic tablets
- ginger tablets
- ginko
- ginseng
- quilinggao
- vitamin E
- Co Q10.

### 3 days before surgery

- Get everything ready to go to the hospital. Plan to bring only a few clothes and the personal care items you need, including:
  - a short, lightweight robe
  - loose fitting clothes with elastic waistbands that you can easily put on when you get ready to leave the hospital
  - t-shirts and undergarments
  - shoes or slippers with a closed back and non-skid soles
  - eyeglasses, if you need them
  - a hairbrush, if you need it.
- Do not pack any valuables. They should be left at home.
- Bring a list of all the medicines you currently take. You don't need to bring them unless we told you to at your pre-appointment. For example, if you take, Forteo, you'll need to bring it with you.

### The day before surgery

The day before surgery, a surgery scheduler will call you to make sure you know what time to come to the hospital.

Please give them a choice of phone numbers to call in case the hospital needs to speak with you.

### The night before surgery

- Remove any nail polish from your fingers and toes.
- Clean your skin to prevent infection:
  - Take a bath or shower.
  - Wait 1 hour. (As you wait, read the instructions that came with the chlorhexidine gluconate antiseptic wipes that we have given you.)
  - After 1 hour, wipe your body with the antiseptic wipes. Follow the instructions exactly. Do not let the wipes touch your eyes, ears, mouth, or genitals. Only use the wipes below the chin. Wipe around the area to be operated on last.
  - Let the antiseptic dry on your body. Do not rinse it off.
- Do not use lotions, moisturizers, powders, or makeup on your body or face after your shower or before you go to bed.

## *Eating and drinking before surgery*

We used to tell you not to eat or drink anything after midnight before your surgery. We have changed this. This change may help you not only feel better but also have better results.

- You may not eat food after midnight, but you're encouraged to drink clear fluids.
- Most people can have clear liquids up to 2 hours before surgery.
- It's best to stop clear fluids when you leave the house or hotel to travel to the hospital on the day of surgery.
- Clear liquids include:
  - water
  - fruit juice without pulp (apple juice and grape juice are clear liquids; orange juice is not)
  - carbonated drinks
  - tea or coffee (no milk or cream)
  - a popsicle
  - sports drinks.

## The day of surgery

- If you shower or bathe the morning of your surgery, do not use any lotions, moisturizers, powders, or makeup to your body or face after you wash.
- You may brush your teeth.
- You may take your morning pills. Pills you may take include medicines for your heart, blood pressure, or breathing, as well as any medicines you may have been given at your pre-anesthesia appointment.
- Before you leave for the hospital, follow the instructions and wipe your body again with the antiseptic wipes. Fill out the form that came with the wipes. Bring this form with you to the hospital. The form will become part of your medical record.



# At the Hospital

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## Go to the admission desk when you arrive

Check in at the hospital 2 hours before your scheduled surgery time. Go straight to the patient admission desk in the main lobby on the first floor of the hospital.

*Remember:* The time your surgery begins may change. Sometimes your surgery can start a few hours later than the scheduled time. Much depends on when the last surgery finishes. Thank you for understanding.

## Leave these things at home

- Do not bring your cane, crutches, or walker when you first come to the hospital.
- Make sure your cane, crutches, or walker are in the vehicle that is picking you up from the hospital. You'll need this to help you walk when you go home.
- Do not bring large amounts of money or valuable items, such as jewelry.

## After you check in, we'll take you to the Holding Room

- One friend or family member can come with you.
- You'll change into a hospital gown. You'll give your clothes and anything else, like dentures, glasses or contact lenses, hairpins, or jewelry, to your support person to take care of while you are in surgery.
- We'll put an IV into your arm. An IV is a tube that goes through your skin and puts medicine directly into your body.
- You'll meet with your anesthesia team. They'll talk with you about your medical history. They may start managing your pain by giving you some pills to take by mouth.
- We'll take you to the operating room on a stretcher.

.....  
*If you feel anxious or  
tense at any time,  
tell your nurse.*  
.....



## Surgery

- From the Holding Room, we'll take you to the operating room. The staff members who are working with your surgeon and the anesthesiologists will prepare you for your surgery. You probably will not see your surgeon at this time. You'll be given general anesthesia. Once you are asleep and about 30 to 60 minutes after you go to the operating room, your surgery will begin.
- When your surgery is finished, it usually takes 30 to 60 minutes to wake you up and put you on the hospital bed before you are taken out of the operating room.
- After surgery, the surgeon will speak with your family.

## What happens during surgery

### **Anesthesia**

Anesthesia is medicine that we'll use before and during surgery to keep you from having pain during surgery. It will also relax you and make you sleep.

### ***There are 4 types of procedures we can do***

#### ***Diskectomy***

During this procedure we remove the disk between 2 vertebrae. Usually, we insert something to replace it.

#### ***Foraminotomy***

During this procedure we open the foramen to relieve pressure on the nerves.

#### ***Laminectomy***

During this procedure we remove the lamina in one or more place from your spine. This will remove pressure on the nerves.

#### ***Vertebroplasty***

During this procedure, we inject surgical cement into the fractured vertebra.

#### ***The procedure***

Your surgeon will make a vertical cut along your spine. The length of this incision will depend on how many bones are being fused. Your surgeon will then do the spine fusion with or without instrumentation. Once the bone graft is in place, your incision will be closed, and the surgery will be complete.

#### ***Spinal cord monitoring***

Spinal cord monitoring is a procedure that may be done by a nurse during your surgery. Electrodes are placed on your scalp and other parts of your body to make sure that the spinal nerves have good blood flow. If you have spinal cord monitoring, you may or may not notice some irritation to your scalp after the surgery. This irritation should go away within a few days after the surgery.

#### ***In case of excess blood loss***

All surgeries will cause some bleeding. However, it's highly unlikely that you will need any blood during your surgery. It's rare that a patient may need blood transfusions either during or after cervical fusion surgery. We'll talk with you about this before surgery. If you are against getting blood products, please let us know.

## We'll manage your pain before, during, and after surgery

Pain is a common part of spine surgery and you should expect it. But know that we'll help you manage your pain. Our goal is to do everything we can to help lower your pain, while managing the side effects of your pain medicine. We want you to be able to get up, move around, and function well enough that you are able to recover as quickly as possible.

### *A multimodal pain approach*

The approach we'll use to treat your pain is what we call a "multimodal" approach. This means we'll treat your pain in multiple ways:

- We'll give you different types of pain medicines.
- We'll give you pain medicines at different times, including before, during, and after your surgery.



.....  
*We'll treat your pain in multiple ways.*  
.....

### *Pain management before surgery*

In the Holding Room, we may give you a few pills to help stop some of your pain before it even starts. The types of pills and the amount of pills that we give you will depend on your personal history. Your history includes any other medical conditions you have, any medicines you regularly take, and your age. The exact medicines you get will be decided by your surgical and anesthesia teams before your surgery.

### *Pain management during surgery*

While you sleep during surgery, the anesthesia team will give you more medicines through your IV. This medicine will help lower the overall pain you have after surgery, as well as the pain and nausea you have immediately after the procedure.

### *Pain management after surgery*

After surgery, we'll continue to give you more medicine for your pain. Like before, the specific medicines we give you will depend on your medical history and the medicines you already take. In general, the medicines you get will usually include a pain medicine, a medicine to lower inflammation and swelling, and a medicine to lower nerve pain.

In most cases, we'll give you prescriptions for these medicines when you leave the hospital, and you will take these medicines for a short time after surgery.

## After surgery, we'll take you to the Recovery Room or the Intensive Care Unit

Most of the time, patients are taken to the Recovery Room right after surgery. But sometimes, after major reconstructions, patients will go to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for 1 or 2 days.

You may go to the ICU after surgery if:

- you had major reconstruction on your back.
- the anesthesiologist decides that your breathing tube should be kept in place after your surgery.

### *The Recovery Room*

In the Recovery Room, we closely watch over you as you wake up after surgery. After you're awake, we'll take you to your regular hospital room on the Spine Floor.

- When you wake up:
  - a nurse will help you breathe deeply and have you cough to clear your lungs
  - you'll do ankle pumps to lower the risk of blood clots
  - you'll have an IV in your arm so we can give you medicine as needed
  - you may get oxygen to help you breathe.
- Most people stay in the Recovery Room for several hours after surgery. How long you are there depends on how your body reacts to the anesthesia.
- If the nurse feels you are up to it, you may be allowed to have visitors once you are awake and your pain is under control.

## *We'll give you pain medicine after surgery*

We'll do everything we can to lessen your pain after surgery. But some pain is simply a part of recovery. Our goal is to make you as comfortable as possible while keeping the side effects of any pain medicine you get as low as possible.

To control your pain after surgery, we will give you:

- pain medicine through your IV
- anti-nausea medicine through your IV

Once you eat solid foods again, we'll give you pain medicines by mouth instead of IV.

Some of these medicines include:

- tylenol
- muscle relaxers (Flexeril, Robaxin, Tizanidine and Valium)
- nerve pain medicine such as Gabapentin or Lyrica
- anti-inflammatory medicine like Toradol( as long as your kidney function is normal)
- opioids like oxycodone. This is only given as needed. You'll need to ask for it when in pain.

A Cryo Cuff will be used to help with swelling and pain near your incision.

Our pain management team is here to help you if you need it.

### ***Other medicines you'll need after surgery***

In addition to pain medicine, you may get medicines to stop nausea, if you need them. Sometimes patients also get blood thinners to help keep blood clots from forming.

Anesthesia and pain medicine can make you feel constipated so we'll also give you medicine to help you go to the bathroom.

During your hospital stay you'll also have a list of "as needed medicines" that will always be available to you. These medicines are for symptoms such as nausea, indigestion, pain, and itching. If you have any symptoms that are not being controlled, please talk with your nurse.

### ***After the Recovery Room, we'll take you to a regular hospital room***

When you're well enough, we'll take you to your regular hospital room. You'll still have your IV in so we can continue to give you medicines.

### ***What to expect after surgery***

#### ***You may have swelling***

It's common for patients to have facial and body swelling after surgery. This is caused by the position your body was in during surgery and your IV fluids. All of this swelling usually goes away in 1 to 2 days. It's nothing to worry about. You may also have a swollen tongue for the first few days after surgery, but this is rare.

#### ***You may have a cardiac monitor***

You may have a cardiac monitor attached to your body so we can watch your heart rate and rhythm.

#### ***You may be wearing an oxygen mask***

You may have an oxygen mask on to help ease your breathing.

#### ***You'll have plastic wraps around your legs***

You'll be wearing inflatable plastic wraps (sequential pumps) on your legs. The pumps are used to help prevent blood clots.

#### ***You may have a Foley catheter***

You may have a Foley catheter in your bladder. This is a tube that's placed into the bladder to drain urine from your body. The catheter will be put into your body after you are asleep in surgery. The Foley catheter will be removed once you're able to get out of bed fairly easily.

#### ***You will likely have drains (Hemovac or JP) attached to your body***

You'll have one or more drains (Hemovac or JP) near your back, front, or side incision(s). These drains collect excess blood and drainage from under the skin. This keeps your wounds from swelling and also helps the doctors estimate your blood loss.

### ***At first, you'll get water and ice chips instead of regular food or drink***

After surgery, you are likely to get sick if you eat regular food right away. Your body has to gradually work up to digesting a regular diet. At first, we'll give you ice chips and sips of water. Next, we'll give you a clear, liquid diet. Finally, when you're ready, you'll go back to eating your regular diet.

### ***Goals after surgery***

On the day of your surgery, we will help you get up and sit on the side of your bed. We will also help you get out of bed to either stand or sit in a chair. It's very important for you to start walking as soon as you can. Walking will help you recover faster.

### ***Move your body***

Moving your body is very important after surgery. We'll help you:

- get out of bed to your chair to eat all 3 meals
- walk the halls 3 times per day. Make sure someone is always with you to walk so you don't fall.



.....  
*Use your spirometer after surgery to help keep your lungs clear.*  
.....

### ***Other important goals***

- start to go the bathroom on your own after we remove your catheter
- have normal bowel movements again
- use the spirometer we give you.

### ***Numbness and tingling***

It's very common for patients to have numbness around their incisions after surgery. This is expected with any skin incision. The area of numbness gradually shrinks with time but may take up to 1 to 2 years to go away. Some patients also say that their feet, legs, or back "feel funny." It's common to have tingling feelings and sensations that can't be explained. If you have any of this, do not worry. These will mostly likely go away over time. It's still safe for you to move and walk.

### ***You'll have breathing exercises to do.***

After surgery, you'll be expected to do breathing exercises to keep your lungs clear. You'll use a device called an incentive spirometer. We'll teach you how to use it.

There's a little ball in the device that rises up with the force of your breath. The higher the ball, the better your lungs are working. Make it a personal contest to continue to increase the number reached by the ball.

We'll work with you and your family to remind you to use your incentive spirometer often while you're in the hospital.

## Staying safe while you're in the hospital

### ***Prevent falls***

When you need to get up or go to the bathroom, always ask for help from your nurse or another staff member. It's very important to stay safe and avoid falls while you are in the hospital.

### ***Prevent blood clots***

You will get plastic sleeves to wear around your legs to help keep blood clots from forming. Some patients also get blood thinning medicines. Every day while you're in the hospital, we'll send a sample of your blood to the lab to make sure your blood is not too thin or too thick.

### ***Keep your lungs clear***

You'll keep doing your breathing exercises and using your incentive spirometer. Exercising your lungs will help prevent pneumonia, which is a risk after surgery.

## The length of your hospital stay

How long you'll be in the hospital after surgery will depend on how well you're able to walk around and how much pain you have. Most patients leave after 2 nights (though some patients are able to leave the hospital the day after surgery). But if you have any other medical issues that slow your recovery, you may need to stay longer. Your surgical team will decide exactly how long you need to stay.

## Visitors

You're allowed to have visitors while you are in the hospital. You may even have 1 person who is 18 or older stay with you at night. Each room has a pull-out bed.

## Getting you ready to leave

A nurse case manager or social worker will probably visit you while you're in the hospital. They're members of your healthcare team. They can help you make plans for the things you'll need to do after you leave the hospital.

This may include arrangements for outpatient therapy and lab work, home health services, and other rehab programs or services. You can ask to speak with the case manager or social worker at any time during your hospital stay.

### ***Make sure you have a ride home***

You must have someone pick you up at the time you're released from the hospital. You will not be allowed to drive yourself home or leave the hospital alone.

### ***Am I allowed to take a taxi or a bus home?***

No. You must have someone pick you up.

# After the Hospital: Your Recovery

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## Caring for your incision

### *Bandages*

Most patients leave with glue, steri-strips (small tape strips), nylon stitches, or staples on their incision(s).

If you have stitches or staples, we'll make an appointment to remove them in 2 to 3 weeks.

- Check your incision daily for any problems.
- Do not put any ointments or solutions over your incision or steri-strips at any time.
- Let the steri-strips fall off on their own. (The only exception is if they are still there 2 weeks after your surgery, then you may have someone remove them at that time.)

### *Showering, bathing, and swimming after surgery*

- Do not get your incision wet for the first 4 days after your surgery. Cover your incision when you shower.
  - We'll give you 4 aquaguards when you leave the hospital; you'll use these to cover your incision when you shower.
  - Put one on before you get in the shower. Then take it off and throw it away after you get out of the shower.

- On the 5th day after your surgery, clean your incision using soap and water when you are in the shower. Then gently pat your incision dry with a towel.
- No tub baths for 4 weeks after surgery.
- No swimming in pools, hot tubs, lakes, rivers, or the ocean for 4 weeks after surgery.
- Only swim or bathe when your doctor has cleared you.

### *Raising your arms overhead when you shower or brush your hair*

It's OK for you to raise your arms over your head to wash and brush your hair.

### *Fighting infection*

- Always wash your hands before and after you touch your incision.
- Call us at (615) 875-5100 if your incision:
  - gets redder
  - swells
  - feels warm or begins to hurt
  - begins to drain or smell bad
  - separates at the edges.
  - you have a temperature higher than 101.5 F (38.6 C).



## Pain

Pain is part of healing. With time, you should have less pain than you had before surgery.

- When you left the hospital, we probably gave you a prescription for pain medicine. While you may need prescription pain medicine at first, it's best to start lowering how much you take as soon as you can.
- If you were taking medicine(s) before your surgery, do not take those medicines with any new prescriptions you get from the surgeon.



.....  
*It's normal to have  
pain after surgery.*  
.....

## Understand your prescription pain medicine

- Take your pain medicine exactly the way your doctor tells you.
- Pain medicine can make you constipated. Drink plenty of water and eat more fiber (found in foods like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) to help you stay regular.
- If you see a pain management doctor, you'll need to have an appointment 7 to 10 days after discharge to get back on your home medicine schedule.
- We can't refill your narcotic pain medicine without an office visit.
- We'll provide some narcotic pain medicine when you go home, to allow time for this appointment.
- We cannot give refills at night or on weekends.
- Things to remember:
  - You cannot call in to the pharmacy for a refill prescription. You must call our office.
  - You can either pick your prescription in person or ask us to mail it to you at your home address.
  - We cannot mail narcotics to your home.

### ***Expect to take less pain medicine over time***

Prescription pain medicine is addictive; it's important that you do not become dependent on it. We'll expect you to use less of it over time.

- When you first leave the hospital, we'll give you a prescription for pain medicine with specific instructions.
- We recommended that you lower your use of pain medicine slowly. If you're taking 2 tablets every 4 hours as needed, then take 1 tablet every 4 hours, then 1 tablet every 5 hours, and so on until you're able to stop taking them all together. You may be given specific instructions on how to do this when you're discharged.

### **Do not take too much acetaminophen**

Severe liver damage may occur if you take more than 4,000 mg of acetaminophen (Tylenol) in a 24-hour period. If you take acetaminophen (Tylenol), take it alone. Do not take it with any prescription pain medicine.

- There are more than 600 over-the-counter and prescription medicines have acetaminophen in them. Some patients go over the recommended dose either by accidentally taking multiple acetaminophen-containing products without realizing it, or by not following dosing instructions.
- Medicines such as Percocet, Vicodin and Norco have acetaminophen in them—from 325 mg to 500 mg per tablet. It's very important that you know the dosage and that you do not combine it with other products containing acetaminophen.

### **For 3 months after surgery, do not take any NSAIDs**

Do not use any NSAIDs (Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines) such as Ibuprofen, Motrin, Advil, Aleve, Celebrex, etc. for at least 3 months after surgery. These medicines will actually slow the fusion healing process.

Once you no longer need your prescription pain medicine, we recommend you take acetaminophen (Tylenol) when you have pain.

## If you were taking a prescription bone medicine before surgery

Your surgeon will tell you when it is OK for you to start taking these medicines again. Do not start taking any bone medicine—including Forteo, Fosamax, and Reclast—until you talk with your surgeon.

## If you're constipated after surgery, follow these bowel medicine guidelines

When you're discharged from the hospital, we may give you a prescription (Senna-S) for a stool softener and laxative medicine. Follow these guidelines if you have problems going to the bathroom:

- If it has been 3 days since your last bowel movement, increase the Senna-S to 2 tablets twice a day. (This is the maximum dose allowed.)
- If you do not have a bowel movement for 5 days, take Miralax as directed in addition to the Senna-S.
- If you have not had a bowel movement for 6 days, take a suppository as directed on packaging.
- If you have not had a bowel movement for 7 days after surgery, use a Fleets enema. Follow the directions on the package. If you're still constipated, please call our office.
- If you become nauseated, have vomiting, your belly is swollen and hard, or you have very bad belly cramping at any time, contact our office immediately.

## Protect your back as you recover

### *Bending and Lifting*

During the first 6 weeks, avoid bending or lifting anything weighing more than 15 pounds. When you lift something, keep it close to your body so that your leg and arm muscles do the work. Remember to brace your abdominal muscles, stoop at the hips and knees keeping your back straight and the three curves of your spine balanced. This will help prevent pain and further injury to your spine.

### *Walking exercise*

Walking is excellent exercise. Walk as much as you can over the next 6 weeks while you are recovering.

### **How much to walk:**

- walk 5 minutes every hour that you're awake. Do this for 1 week.
- after 1 week, walk 8 to 10 minutes every hour that you're awake.

### **Walking will:**

- help your bones fuse by increasing the flow of blood to the area that was fused
- benefit your lungs, heart, circulation, and digestion
- help keep blood clots from forming
- increase your muscle strength and endurance.

### **Remember, no BLT ( bending, lifting, or twisting):**

- no bending at the waist
- no lifting more than 15 pounds
- no twisting at the waist.

## Going to the bathroom

Low toilet seats can make regular toileting very difficult and even unsafe for patients who have had back surgery. Depending on the type, location, and surrounding area of your toilet at home, you may be instructed in using a raised toilet seat or toilet rails.

## Walking, dressing, and bathing

Members of the physical therapy and occupational therapy teams will work with you in the hospital so you'll know how to safely walk, resume activities, bathe, dress, and take care of yourself as you recover.

- A physical therapist will work with you so you know how to safely move around and stay active.
- An occupational therapist will help you learn how to safely do activities like bathing and dressing while you recover.
- Because of your loss in flexibility and the mobility restrictions, consider these tips:
  - Dress sitting in a supportive chair using adaptive equipment to reach your legs.
  - Wear loose-fitting clothes and slip-on shoes for the first several weeks.
- To help you dress, we may provide you with some of these tool:
  - a long-handled reacher
  - a long- handled sponge
  - elastic shoe laces
  - a sock donner
  - a long-handled shoe horn.

## Adaptive equipment

Patients sometimes need adaptive equipment (a wheeled walker, an elevated toilet seat) after surgery. Hospital beds are generally not needed when a person goes home after a spinal surgery. You'll be able to sleep in your regular bed as long as it's not too low to the ground or a water bed. Your occupational and physical therapist will see you during your hospitalization and help you get any equipment you'll need at home.



.....  
*Walking is great exercise and helps your body heal faster and get stronger.*  
.....

### ***Turning safely in bed***

- Tighten your stomach muscles and bend your knees slightly toward your chest.
- Roll to one side, keeping your ears, shoulders and hips in line. Be careful not to bend or twist at the waist.

### ***Getting out of bed safely***

- Tighten your stomach muscles and turn onto your side.
- Push your body up with one elbow and the other hand. At the same time, gently lower both legs to the floor. Keep your stomach muscles tight.

### ***Protect your back while getting up and sitting down***

- Use your arms to lift up and get down.
- Keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in line, brace your stomach muscles, bend at the hips keeping your back straight.
- Use your leg muscles to lower and raise yourself onto the front edge of the chair or couch.

### ***Standing for a long time***

- Change your position often by shifting your weight from one foot to the other.
- Don't twist or turn from the waist. Instead, turn your entire body as a single unit.

### ***Going up and down stairs***

- Use handrails if you can, and climb just one step at a time. Remember to be careful and take your time.
- Your physical therapist will practice going up and down stairs with you while you're at the hospital.

## **Protect your back when you ride in a car**

### ***Driving***

No driving for 2 weeks and for as long as you are on prescription pain medicine.

### ***Riding as a passenger***

You may ride in a car as a passenger whenever you feel you can tolerate this. Some tips:

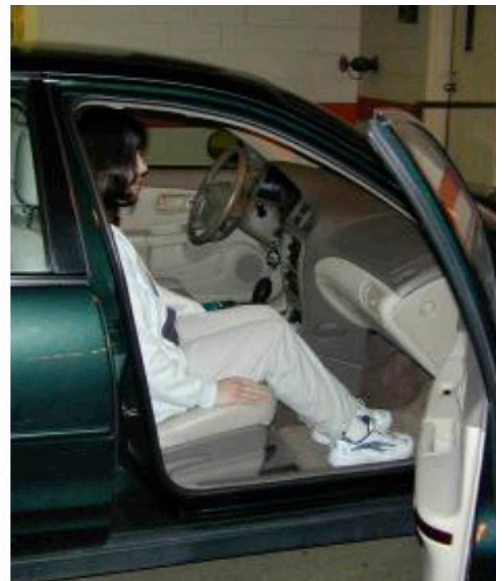
- You should sit in the front passenger seat, with the seat slightly reclined.
- You should probably start with shorter drives. If you do take a longer trip, stop every hour and walk around.
- As you recover, only ride in cars that are mid-size or larger.
- Avoid all compact cars (2 doors), all sports cars, and cars with bucket seats. It's hard to sit down so low.

### *Getting in and out of the car*

- To enter the car, walk up to the passenger door, turn, and then back up until you feel the car behind your legs. Reach back and place your left hand on the dashboard or car door and place your right hand on the back of the front seat. Bend your legs and gently sit down. Scoot your hips back and slowly turn your body as you put your legs inside the car.
- To exit the car, gently turn your body toward the door while placing your legs outside the car. Scoot forward until your feet are on the ground. Then push up to a standing position by placing your arms on the dashboard or car door and back of the seat.
- A plastic trash bag or satin pillowcase on the car seat is helpful for sliding and turning.

### *Stop and take breaks if you're in the car for a long period of time*

When you're in a car, we recommend that you stop every hour to get out and walk. This is especially important when you leave the hospital if your home is far away. Walking and moving will help keep blood clots from forming.



.....  
*Take care while getting in and out of a car.*  
.....

## More tips for staying safe as you recover

Be sure to explain to your entire family what you must do to be safe.

- Always keep a cell phone or cordless phone with you in case you are alone and need help.
- Use a walker basket or shopping bag so you can carry items with you when you use your walker.
- Keep a night light on in hallways and in the bathroom.
- Allow yourself extra time when you get up from sitting or lying down. It will help keep you from getting dizzy.
- Don't walk outside in icy or snowy conditions.

## Sexual activity

It's safe for you to have sex when you feel comfortable and it doesn't cause you pain. Avoid twisting and bending at the waist while you are healing. The safest position is lying flat on your back in bed.

## Returning to work

Most patients are able to go back to desk work by 6 weeks after their surgery. All of this depends on your progress and the type of surgery you had. We recommend that when you do go back, you go back to half days for the first couple of weeks.

## Preventing setbacks

As you recover, be careful and increase your activity slowly. If you have increased pain for more than 2 hours after an activity, it usually means you've done too much too soon. Don't just reach for the pain pills. Take pain as a warning sign to slow down and pay attention to your posture and movements. Make sure you're bracing your belly muscles and keeping your ears, shoulders and hips in line.

## Staying safe if you have pets

If you have pets, you'll probably need help taking care of them after surgery. You will not be able to lift heavy bags of pet food or bend down to the floor to fill their dishes. You will not be able to walk your dog using a leash if it's a large dog that pulls. Also, it's very easy to trip over pets, and you'll need to be careful since pets may jump. Please make arrangements for assistance with pet care after your surgery.



.....  
*Be careful using a leash.*  
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# After Surgery: What to Expect

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## Keep your 2-week follow-up appointment

It's important to keep your follow-up appointment. Most patients have a follow-up appointment at 2 weeks and again at 6 weeks. If no appointment has been scheduled for you within a few days after your surgery, please call us at (615) 875-5100 to set up an appointment.

## Remember that you're still healing

Bone takes 4 to 8 months to fully fuse and heal. Until that time, you may still have some aches and pains in your back. All of this is normal during the healing process.

Around 4 to 8 months after the fusion, you may notice a sudden decrease in your pain. This is the day that the bones all fused together and became solid. Patients have often described it as a light switch going off. You can help yourself heal faster by doing these things:

- During the first few weeks, get up and walk 3 to 4 times a day. Increase the amount of time you walk each week. Getting up and moving will help feed the growing bone with oxygenated blood.
- Avoid extreme motion in your back. The less you stress it, the faster it heals.
- Don't take ibuprofen, Aleve, aspirin or any other anti-inflammatories, as they all slow down bone healing. You may take acetaminophen (Tylenol) products for pain.
- Don't smoke or use any tobacco products.

## *If you had arm weakness before surgery*

If you had weakness in your arms before the surgery, you can start doing weight lifting 6 weeks after your surgery.

## *If you had numbness before your surgery*

If you had numbness for more than 3 weeks before your surgery, it's possible that you still have not noticed an improvement.

- It often takes weeks to months for numbness to get better, especially if you had constant numbness for a long time before surgery.
- Until the 1-year mark, we won't be able to tell if the numbness is permanent.



# Common Questions

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## How long should I avoid driving?

- Do not drive while taking pain medicines.
- Avoid driving during the busy traffic times.
- Some states do not allow collars when driving. You should wear your collar when driving, so if your state does not allow you to drive with a collar, then do not drive for the first 6 weeks after surgery.

## When is it safe for me to have sex again?

You can have sex as soon as you feel comfortable doing so. The safest position is for you to lie flat in bed.

## When can I lift weights?

Avoid all overhead lifting. You can lift light weights that are 15 pounds or less. Hold the weights close to your body when you lift. And keep the neck in a neutral position while lifting.

## Will the instruments used in my fusion cause alarms in airports to go off?

No. The materials used in your fusion are made of titanium. You will not trigger any alarms or metal detectors.



.....  
*Remember to carefully  
position your mirrors  
before starting to drive.*  
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