

Recovering from your abdominal surgery

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You should read this information along with any other information you have been given about your recovery. You should already have information about exercises, nutrition and preventing DVT (blood clots in the legs).

What you should expect after a laparotomy (a cut on the abdomen)

Anaesthesia – Most modern anaesthetics are short lasting. It is unusual to suffer from side effects for more than a day after your operation.

Scars and stitches – The surgery is carried out through a cut on the abdomen, this may be across the bikini line or vertically up and down the abdomen. You will have staples or stitches. Check with your nurse if these need to be removed. Details for treatment rooms (district nurses) will be provided on discharge from hospital.

Vaginal bleeding – You can expect to have some vaginal bleeding for up to 6 weeks after your operation, this is like a light period and is red or brown in colour. Some women have little or no bleeding initially and then have a sudden gush of old blood or fluid about 10 days later. This usually stops quickly. Only use sanitary towels. Tampons will increase risk of infection.

Pain and discomfort – You can expect pain and discomfort in your abdomen for at least the first few days after your operation. Taking regular pain relief will help you to mobilise better which will speed up your recovery and help prevent the formation of blood clots in your legs and lungs.

Trapped wind – Your bowel may temporarily slow down causing air or ‘wind’ to be trapped. Getting out of bed and walking around will help, peppermint water, peppermint tea and capsules may also ease your discomfort. Once your bowels start to move the trapped wind will ease.

Tiredness and emotions – You may feel much more tired than usual after you operation as your body is using a lot of energy to heal. A hysterectomy can also be emotionally stressful and many women feel tearful and emotional at first, when you are tired these feelings can seem worse. For many women, this is the last symptom to improve.

Sex – You should allow 4-6 weeks after your operation to allow your scars to heal. It is then safe to have sex – as long as you feel comfortable.

Cervical screening (smears) – Check with your gynaecologist or GP if you need to continue with smear tests.

Driving – It can take up to 6 weeks before you are able to drive. Before you drive you should be:

- Free from sedative effects from pain killers
- Able to sit in the car comfortably and work the controls
- Able to wear seatbelt comfortably
- Able to make an emergency stop
- Able to comfortably look over your shoulder to manoeuvre

It is a good idea to practice without the keys in the ignition. See if you can do all the movements you would need for an emergency stop and a three point turn without causing yourself pain and discomfort. When you are ready to start driving again, build up gradually, starting with a short journey.

Work – many women are able to go back to work after 6 weeks if they have been building up their levels of physical activity at home.

What can help you recover?

There are a number of positive steps you can take:

Rest – Rest as much as you can for the first few days after you get home. It is good to relax, but avoid crossing your legs when you are sat or lying down. Rest does not mean doing nothing at all throughout the day. It is important to start exercising and doing light activities around the house within the first few days.

Pelvic floor exercises – Your pelvic floor muscles span the base of your pelvis. It is important to get these muscles working properly after your operation, even if you have stitches. Make these exercises part of your daily routine for the rest of your life. Some women use triggers to remind themselves such as, brushing their teeth, washing up or commercial breaks on television.

Eat a healthy balanced diet – Ensure your body has all the nutrients it needs by eating a healthy balanced diet. A healthy diet is a high fibre diet (fruit, vegetables, wholegrain bread and cereal) with up to 2 litres a day of fluid intake, mainly water. You will only gain weight if you eat more than you need to and you are not exercising enough.

Keep your bowels working – Your bowels will take time to return to normal. You may need to take laxatives to avoid straining and constipation. If you are taking pain relief that contains codeine, these can make you sleepy, slightly sick and constipated.

Returning to work – Returning to work can help your recovery by getting back into your normal routine. Some women who are off work for longer periods start to feel isolated and depressed.

When should I seek medical advice?

Complications can occur after your operation, as with any operation. You should seek medical advice from your GP, the ward, NHS direct or NHS 24 if you experience:

Burning and stinging when you pass urine or pass urine frequently – this may be due to urine infection and may require a course of antibiotics.

Heavy or smelly vaginal bleeding – this may be due to infection and may require a course of antibiotics. Occasionally some women need to be admitted to hospital if symptoms are severe.

Increasing abdominal pain – this could be due to constipation, infection or other complication and may require medical attention.

A painful, red, swollen, hot leg or difficulty putting weight on your legs – this may be caused by DVT which will require treatment. If you have any pains in your chest or shortness of breath, you must seek medical help immediately.

Redness, increase oozing and pain from abdominal scar – this could be due to infection and require a course of antibiotics

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