



How to maximise your post-surgery recovery?



The road to recovery after surgery can be very different for everyone. Some find it easy, while others find it hard. Knowing the impact and what to consider will help make plans and recovery easier.



Surgeon instructions

Ask your surgeon before you leave the hospital or the ward staff what signs to watch out for and what to do if you're worried about any issues. Most wards will give you a post-surgery guide for the weeks after the operation, along with a number to call for help. You can also contact your GP or call 111 if you have any concerns after being discharged. Try to keep to your follow up appointments, as this will involve a review of your recovery and change of dressings or removal of sutures.



Wound care

It's important to follow individual instructions on caring for your wound, as it will help to lower the risk of infection and promote healing.

Things to consider:

- Keep the wound/dressing dry, as recommended, reducing the risk of infection.
- Keep an eye out for signs of infection. If the area feels hot, itchy, looks red, leaks blood or pus, swells, has a bad smell or if you have a raised temperature, get in touch with your GP or hospital. You might need antibiotics if it's an infection.
- If your stitches come out or start to come undone, even if it's just a small gap, it can lead to an infection. Get medical help as soon as you can.
- When sneezing or coughing, please take care to support the wound. You can do this by using a pillow against the area.



Common complications or concerns

- **Nausea:** After surgery, some people can feel sick because of the anaesthesia. If you've had this before, let your anaesthetist know. They can give you something to help.
- **Difficulty urinating:** It could be due to the anaesthesia or a catheter. To stay well, drink lots of fluids, stay active and avoid alcohol or caffeine. If it doesn't improve, you should see a doctor.
- **Fever:** After surgery, you might have a mild fever. Usually, you can treat it with medicine. But if you have a high or ongoing fever, you should see a doctor.
- **Constipation:** Surgery can cause constipation due to the anaesthesia, medication, inactivity or dehydration. To manage this, eat a high-fibre diet and drink plenty of fluids. Avoid straining during bowel movements to prevent putting pressure on sutures. Your surgeon may prescribe lactulose, a laxative, in the first few days after your surgery.
- **Sore throat:** If a tube is placed down your throat to secure the airways, it can sometimes lead to a sore throat. To help you feel better, try drinking plenty of fluids, eating cold treats like ice lollies, taking over-the-counter pain medication and using throat lozenges.
- **Depression/anxiety:** You might have felt this before the surgery, or found it is getting worse after, due to the ongoing pain or limited daily activities. Look out for symptoms like worrying more than usual, feeling down or changes in your appetite, sleep pattern or irritability. If you notice any of this, it's best to talk to your GP for support.





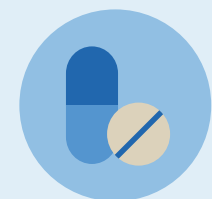
Cold/heat therapy

Use an ice pack, if recommended. It's a great way to reduce bruising, swelling and inflammation after surgery. It can also relieve pain and discomfort, helping to lower the risk of issues like infection or excessive scarring.

After surgery, keep the area protected when using an ice pack. Wrap it in a cloth before applying to your skin. Check for cold spots and don't leave it on for more than 20 minutes at a time. Always follow your doctor's instructions for post-surgery care and ice pack use.

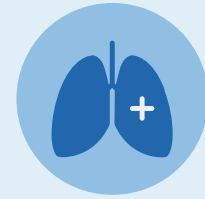
Heat therapy can be used for longer periods than cold therapy. It helps improve blood flow and circulation to the affected area, soothing discomfort, relaxing the muscles and aiding in the healing of damaged tissue. You can use a hot water bottle, heat pads or a warming gel.

Note: don't apply ice or heat directly to the wound. If using a cold or heated item, wrap it in a towel to protect your skin.



Pain relief

We all manage pain differently but it's important to find the best way to effectively manage your pain to promote optimum recovery. This may initially be via stronger prescribed analgesia and then a move to over-the-counter pain medication. Other general forms of pain relief to consider, that you can easily buy at most pharmacies or supermarkets, may include heat pads, medicated gels or creams. If you want to know more about managing pain, you can ask your Zurich Rehabilitation Case Manager for our pain guide.



Breathe

If you've had surgery on your stomach, heart, lungs or spine, breathing exercises can help your lungs to recover from the anaesthetic. These expand your lungs and removes mucus that gathers there. Ask your doctor for advice if you're not sure how to do this.

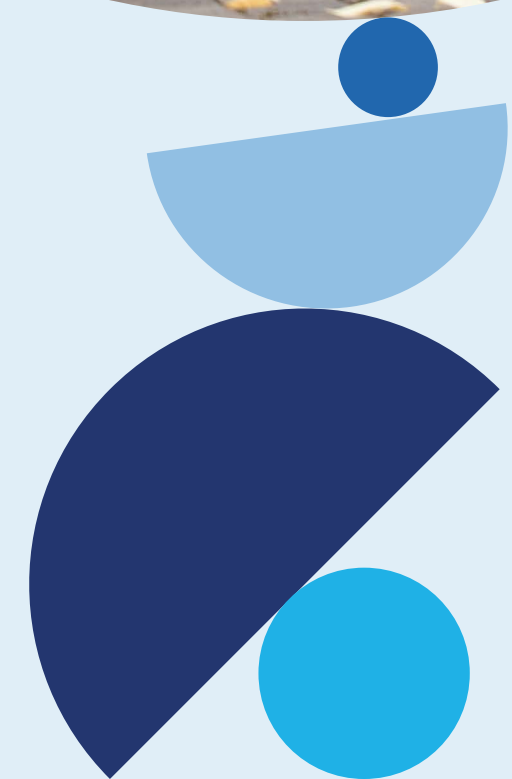
A common complication following surgery is development of a chest infection. Symptoms to look out for post operation include:

- Feeling unwell and tired.
- A cough that brings up thick yellow/green phlegm.
- A feverish temperature.
- Chest pain or difficulty breathing.
- Confusion, especially if elderly.



Mobilising

Try to move around as soon as it's been approved by your doctor. If you're unsure whether to move, ask your doctor. They can give you specific do's and don'ts. You might have the green light for simple activities, like walking, but a red light for strenuous ones. Be kind to yourself and expect to need rest after surgery to let your body recover, balanced with gentle movement and increasing gradually as your condition allows. It's natural to worry about moving after surgery, but staying in bed causes problems. Moving circulates blood, keeps joints flexible and prevents blood clots. Even if you're tired, try not to just rest. Moving shakes off fatigue and aids digestion. But don't overdo it. Moving also promotes better sleep, aiding the healing process. If physiotherapy is recommended, make sure you attend appointments and do your home exercises. It can help you get stronger and recover safely.





Eat and drink

It's normal to not feel like eating or drinking, especially if you're feeling sick or haven't had a bowel movement. But it's crucial to refuel. Food provides the energy your body needs to fight off infection, speed up healing and increase strength. Fluids keep you hydrated. If you don't consume enough food or fluids, your recovery could be slow.

- ✓ Berries and brightly coloured fruits have carbs, antioxidants, fibre and vitamins, helping wound healing and preventing constipation.
- ✓ Vegetables are key for vitamins, minerals and helping constipation.
- ✓ Healthy fats like olive oil, avocados, nuts and seeds boost your energy and immunity. They also contain vitamin E, which speeds up wound healing and reduces scarring.
- ✓ Dark, leafy greens such as kale and spinach are super nutritious. They have vitamins A, C and E for healing and energy, plus vitamin K for clotting.
- ✓ Protein found in meat, poultry, seafood, beans and lentils, nuts and Tofu help with muscle repair and regenerating tissue which can speed up healing.
- ✓ Eggs supply a multitude of protein, vitamins and minerals vital for a quick recovery.
- ✓ Wholegrains found in wholewheat bread, quinoa and wild rice supply a source of energy and fibre.
- ✓ Probiotics are good bacteria that aid digestion and mental balance. They can be found in Yoghurts, Cheddar, Parmesan, Gouda, Green olives, Sauerkraut and Miso.
- ✓ Water is vital after surgery. Dehydration can slow down recovery, so drink water even if you're not thirsty. If plain water isn't your thing, try squash, smoothies with extra fluid or herbal teas.

Try to avoid foods high in salt or sugar, highly processed food and alcohol. After surgery, try not to eat too much at once. It's better to have smaller, more frequent meals. This helps with digestion and reduces the risk of nausea and bloating.



Work

Your surgeon or GP will let you know when it's safe to return to work. Take it easy, listen to your body and follow their advice. If you feel guilty or are struggling financially, it's crucial to focus on getting better. Talk to your employer about ways they can support you, like coming back to work part-time or with lighter tasks until you're ready to return to your usual job and hours. Discuss your return to work concerns and necessary adjustments with your employer's Occupational Health team.

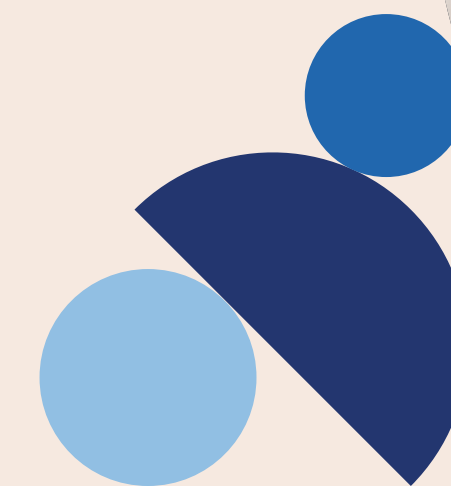


Driving

After an anaesthetic, avoid driving for a few days. Your insurance policy will specify this period. Follow your doctor's advice about driving. There are good reasons for it, whether it's for a short time or longer. Your reactions might be slower and you could have an accident. Until you're ready, it's best to make other travel plans or ask for help from family and friends, if possible. You must inform the DVLA if you've had an operation and you still can't drive after 3 months. After an operation, some strong painkillers may advise against driving or using machinery. Check the label on the packaging for details.

If you have any questions or concerns after your surgery, call your GP or 111.

If you have any questions about your rehabilitation plan, please reach out to your Zurich Rehabilitation Case Manager.



Research used to compile this guide:

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NICE Guidelines

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