

Care after an Anterior Cervical Discectomy and Fusion

What can i expect after the procedure? It is common to have:

1. Pain between the shoulder the blades and/or neck, sore throat.
2. Some patients experience numbness below the chin.
3. Some patients have difficulty swallowing, this will go away in 3-4 weeks but can last longer.
4. Numbness or tingling in the arms or hands as the nerves “wake up”.
5. Mild temperature <100.5 for 2-3 days is normal. After 1 week, this is not normal.
6. Mild drainage the first 2-3 days. Drainage after 1 week is unusual.

Incision care:

1. Leave your dressing on a minimum of 48 hours. After 48 hours leave the incision open to air to promote healing.
2. Change the dressing if it gets wet or soaked with blood.
3. Wash your hands with soap & water before changing your dressing
4. Do not put lotions or ointments on your incision.
5. Check your incision every day for signs of infection. If you cannot see your incision, have someone check it for you. Most spine infections occur 7-9 days after surgery.
6. Check for: More redness, swelling or pain, fluid or blood, warmth, pus or bad smell, or a temperature >101.5 degrees fahrenheit.

Bathing:

1. Do not take baths, swim, or use a hot tub for 2 weeks. You may shower.
2. You may shower, but keep the dressing dry by covering it or avoiding direct spray from water. The covering over the incision (Tegaderm) is waterproof but still needs extra protection. If it gets wet, remove the dressing and leave the incision open to air.

Activity:

1. No lifting over 10 lbs or twisting your neck for the first 6 weeks. After 6-12 weeks 25 lbs below the shoulder level, 15 lbs above the shoulder. 12 weeks & beyond use common sense.
2. Wear your neck brace for the first 8 weeks.
3. Avoid sitting or lying for a long time without moving. Get up to take short walks every 1-2 hours. This is important to improve blood flow and breathing. Ask for help if you feel weak or unsteady.
4. Try to walk 30 minutes a day. You may start by doing 10-15 minutes at a time.
5. Do not bend or twist at the neck.
6. **If provided with sequential compression devices, wear them as directed until your follow up appointment with your surgeon. Please wear sequential compression devices when sedentary for greater than one hour.**

Managing pain, stiffness and swelling

1. Put ice in a plastic bag, place a pillowcase between your skin and the bag.
2. Leave ice on for 20 minutes, 2-3 times a day.
3. No heat
4. If experiencing burning pain or tightness between the shoulder blades use your muscle relaxer to manage the symptoms.
5. If you are having severe nerve pain, your doctor may prescribe gabapentin. If your given gabapentin, begin with one tablet at night for 3 or 4 days, then increase it to one during the day and one at night for 3 or 4 more days. Increase to 3 times daily as tolerated.

Driving

1. Do not drive for 24 hours if you were given a medicine to relax (sedative/anesthesia) during your procedure.
2. Most people wait 1-2 weeks before driving.
3. Do not drive or use heavy machinery while taking prescription pain medication.
4. **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR SAFE DRIVING.**

General instructions

1. You may take over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol.
2. Avoid anti-inflammatory medications (i.e. Motrin/Naprosyn/Mobic).
3. If you are taking prescription pain medicine, take actions to treat constipation. Take an over-the-counter or prescription medicine for constipation such as MiraLAX once per day. If that does not work, use a Dulcolax suppository. Senekot can also be taken twice a day for constipation that is not relived by MiraLAX alone.

4. Please resume any blood thinners 96 hours after procedure/surgery unless otherwise directed.

Contact a health care provider if:

1. You have a fever over 100.5 after the first 3 days.
2. You have pain or weakness that lasts longer than 3 weeks after surgery.
3. You have more redness, swelling, or pain in your incision area.
4. You have fluid or blood coming from your incision after 3-4 days.
5. You have pus or a bad smell coming from your incision after 3-4 days.
6. Your incision feels warm to touch after the first week.

You may need to go to the emergency room if:

1. You have weakness or arm pain that keeps you from moving your arms or hands.
2. You lose sensation & control of your urine and bowels (incontinence).
3. You have chest pain.
4. You have trouble breathing.
5. You have mental confusion or are difficult to wake up.

Summary

- After an anterior cervical discectomy fusion, it is common to have numbness or tingling in the arms as the nerves, “wake up”. Be patient, this will slowly go away over time.
- Be sure to check your incision every day for signs of infection.
- Avoid twisting & bending your neck for the first 6-8 weeks. Do not lift more than 10 lbs for the first 6 weeks. For 6-12 weeks do not lift more than 25 lbs below the shoulder level or 15 lbs above the shoulder. Twelve weeks & beyond, please use common sense.
- Try to walk 30 minutes a day.
- Physical therapy is not prescribed until 12 weeks after surgery.
- Not all patients need physical therapy.