Going home after major gynaecological surgery

Information for patients
Gynaecology
Discharge advice following your surgery

You have had a major operation. This booklet gives some useful advice about what to expect when you return home and how to look after yourself during your recovery.

You have had (operation details):

Your ward is:

If you have any worries or concerns in the 2 weeks following your discharge from the hospital, you should call us for advice on the following number(s). After this time you should contact your GP.

Telephone:
What happens before I go home?

Before you leave hospital it is important to talk to a member of staff if you are worried about anything relating to your operation. Please do not hesitate to ask for more information.

If you need a follow-up appointment, staff will make sure this has been requested before you leave the hospital.

If you are taking medicines, you will be given a supply to take home. If you need more of your medicines when you return home, you can get these from your GP.

How will I feel when I get home?

When you get home, do not be surprised if you find you get tired easily. You may also find that you get emotional or weepy. This will improve as you recover from your surgery.

If you are worried about any of your symptoms when you are at home please see your GP.

Please note it is normal for you to have some vaginal bleeding for up to 7-10 days after your surgery, this is not usually something to be concerned about, and the length of time does depend on the surgery you have had.
What can I do to help my recovery?

You have had a major operation and will need some help at home for the first few days. You should treat your first two weeks at home as recovery time. You will need to:

- Get plenty of rest
- Go for short walks (to lessen the chance of getting complications like thrombosis and muscle weakness).
  The risk of developing blood clots in your legs or lungs can continue for up to 4 weeks after you have returned home. Make sure that you remember to walk around as much as you are able.
- Eat a well balanced diet
- Drink plenty of water (at least 2 litres a day)
- Do the simple leg exercises (shown on the last page).
- Wear support stockings at home, if you have been asked to do so. Please wear them for the recommended time (usually 6 weeks after your operation).

Some patients may be considered at very high risk of developing a blood clot. If this is the case your consultant may decide that you need to have Dalteparin injections. Some patients or their relatives/friends are able to give this injection and others have theirs given by the district nursing service. We will discuss this with you if necessary.

How does my wound(s) heal?

All wounds go through several stages of healing and your wound(s) will change over time. It is common for people to feel:

- An unusual stretching feeling like tingling, numbness or itching
- A slight hard lumpy feeling as the skin heals
- A slight pulling around the stitches as the wound(s) heal
Can I do anything to help my wound(s) to heal?

You can look after your wound by:

- Gently massaging around the wound(s)
- Having a bath or shower each day
- Drying your wound(s) carefully after washing (do not use talcum powder or creams)

When can I start to return to everyday activities?

This will depend on the kind of surgery you have had. We will talk to you about what you can do after your operation; we have provided the table on pages 6-7 as a rough guide. Generally our advice is to avoid heavy lifting and straining but to otherwise do what feels comfortable and not to force the pace.

Please continue the physiotherapy exercises described on pages 10-12.

How can I help myself to stay well?

Regular exercise will keep your bones healthy. It is a very good idea to carry on with your pelvic floor exercises.

When can I start having sex again?

You should avoid sex for the first 6 weeks after your surgery. This may be longer (up to 12-14 weeks) if you have had vaginal surgery. This will allow the stitches inside you to heal and lessen the chances of you getting an infection. After that time there should be no problems though it is a good idea to discuss this with your nurse or doctor. You should also discuss with them the need to use contraception in the future and if so which method would be suitable.
What can I do at home?

The following table should be used as a general guide.

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<th>Abdominal surgery</th>
<th>Vaginal surgery</th>
<th>Laparoscopic surgery</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>When you first go home</strong></td>
<td>Make yourself light snacks and drinks</td>
<td>Make yourself light snacks and drinks</td>
<td>Make yourself light snacks and drinks</td>
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<td><strong>After 3 weeks</strong></td>
<td>Start ironing</td>
<td>Start ironing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do light housework</td>
<td>Do light housework</td>
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<td>Start driving again</td>
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<td>(If you have had any kind of repair surgery, you should not drive until 6 weeks after your operation).</td>
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<td><strong>After 6 weeks</strong></td>
<td>Start vacuuming.</td>
<td>Start vacuuming.</td>
<td>Start vacuuming.</td>
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<td>Swim if your wound is healed and dry and you do not have excessive vaginal discharge.</td>
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<td>Start driving again.</td>
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<td><strong>After 8 weeks</strong></td>
<td>Swim - (as long as you do not have excessive vaginal discharge).</td>
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<td><strong>After 10 weeks</strong></td>
<td>Do gentle exercise like low impact aerobics or jogging.</td>
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<td><strong>After 12 weeks</strong></td>
<td>Do everything you normally do.</td>
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When can I get back to work?

This will depend on the type of surgery you have had. If you have had major abdominal surgery you will need at least 8 weeks off work, more if your job involves lifting or is very active. If you have had vaginal surgery you may be able to go back to work after 6 weeks.

When will I be able to drive again?

You should not start driving again for at least 3-6 weeks after your surgery, depending on the surgery you had (see table on pages 6-7). It is important you check that your insurance covers you to drive after surgery like this, so contact your insurance company before you start driving again. Before you start driving, test to see that you are comfortable doing an emergency stop.

What about the long term future?

You should try to eat a well balanced diet. This helps you to stop putting on weight and makes it less likely that you will have any complications like constipation or problems with your wound healing. You should drink plenty of liquids - at least 2 litres a day. This will also help prevent constipation, urine infections and thrombosis.

Will I need to continue with cervical screening (smear tests)?

If you have had a full hysterectomy you will not usually need these but check with your nurse or doctor before you leave the hospital.
Is there anything else I need to know?

If you have had your ovaries taken out you may need to have hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Talk to your doctor about this.

If you have not had your ovaries taken out they can sometimes stop working after gynaecological surgery. If you get hot flushes or sweats ask your GP for a blood test to check whether your ovaries are working properly.

It is important that every woman keeps a check on her breasts. This means knowing how your breasts look and feel normally so you can spot any changes in them.

Is there anything that I should look out for when I go home?

You should contact the gynaecology ward or your GP if you have any of the following:

- Vaginal bleeding that is heavy or smelly
- Wound(s) that becomes red, swollen or starts oozing
- You feel feverish or unwell
- Pain that is not controlled with paracetamol or ibuprofen (simple pain relief)
Physiotherapy exercises

Strengthen your pelvic floor muscles

Your pelvic floor muscles support the bladder and bowel. They also help to support the pelvis.

Breathe out and imagine you are trying to stop yourself from passing urine or wind. You should feel a gentle lift up within your vagina. The muscles you are tightening are the pelvic floor muscles.

There are two different kinds of exercise. You should always practice both kinds of exercises. Try to do these exercises 3-4 times a day.
Gentle, long holds:

- Lie or sit in a comfortable position.
- Relax and breathe in, as you breathe out, gently pull in the pelvic floor muscles.
- Hold the muscle for a few seconds and then release the muscle fully.
- Repeat this 5 times.
- You may not feel much happening at first but keep trying.
- Build up to a 10 second gentle hold and repeat 10 times. Rest for 5 seconds between each squeeze.

Quick, short squeeze:

- Pull up the pelvic floor muscle as quickly and strongly as you can and then let go immediately.
- Rest for 2 seconds and then do it again.
- Repeat this 10 times.

Later on you should be able to practice both these exercises when you are in a standing position.

Make sure you tighten your pelvic floor muscles before you cough/sneeze and before you stand up.
Abdominal exercises

Gentle abdominal exercises will help your pelvis to move more freely, reducing back pain and stiffness, improve your posture and stability.

- Lie on your back with your knees bent up and your feet flat on the bed.
- Put one hand on your tummy and the other under the small of your back.
- Pull your tummy muscles in as you push your back down onto the hand that is underneath you. This is called a pelvic tilt.
- Hold this position for the count of three, and then relax.
- Repeat this pelvic tilt ten times.
- Do the exercise at least twice a day.

You should be able to feel both the pelvic floor and the abdominal muscles work together.

It is important to keep a good posture and stand tall when you walk. Your tummy and pelvic floor muscles will work to hold you in this good posture and help to prevent back pain.

It is recommended that you continue both of these exercises for at least four to six weeks after your operation to help the wounds heal, but remember that it is important to do the pelvic floor exercises for the rest of your life.
Simple leg exercise to prevent blood clots

Here is a simple exercise you can do, even when you are lying in bed, to help your blood to move around your body.

- Lying on your back or sitting, bend and straighten your ankles quickly.
- If you keep your knees straight during the exercise you will stretch your calf muscles.
- Repeat ten times.

Further physiotherapy information

For further information and advice about fitness following surgery please go to http://pogp.csp.org.uk/