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**SOUTHEASTERN SPINE INSTITUTE**

presents

*How to Make a  
Full Recovery  
from Back Surgery*

**An eBook for Patients**

# *How to Make a Full Recovery from Back Surgery*

Presented by the SOUTHEASTERN SPINE INSTITUTE

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## Chapter 1

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# *Back Surgery Rehab Makes a Difference*

In the world of spinal medicine, surgery often is the last resort. But when you've run out of other options, the spine specialists at the Southeastern Spine Institute usually can perform surgery with a minimal incision. Then it's up to you to complete your back surgery rehab to get back on your feet as quickly as possible.



The type of back surgery rehab your doctor and physical therapist prescribe is determined by the type of operation you had, but there are general guidelines to follow. The goal of back surgery rehab is to strengthen your muscles while allowing your body to heal. That combination helps you get back to your normal life as quickly and as pain-free as possible.

### *Follow Your Surgeon's Instructions*

At the Southeastern Spine Institute in Mt. Pleasant, SC, physical therapy is on campus. Your physical therapist and your spine surgeon work together to develop a program that works for your specific case. When you receive instructions from either your surgeon or your therapist regarding your back surgery rehab, follow them to the letter. They are not suggestions; they provide the fastest path to recovery.

Depending on the procedure you had, including artificial disc replacement, your spine surgeons may get you up and walking as early as the evening after your surgery. Certainly, you can expect to be given stretching exercises that you will have to follow. And remember: your back surgery rehab will take six to eight weeks. Plan on having some physical limitations during this time.

### *Recovering at Home*

Your back surgery rehab continues at home. You may be given some form of pain control; you may need to apply ice to your wound; and you may be restricted to certain positions. Be on the lookout for signs of infection, such as a fever, swelling at the incision point or excessive draining. You need to keep your wound clean, of course, but contact your spinal surgeon if you suspect an infection.

For the first four weeks following your surgery, you may be restricted to walking and stretching. If you had a spinal fusion, for example, you may have to wear a back brace to keep your spine properly aligned. Again, follow your doctor or physical therapist's instructions. They know best.

### *Getting Back to Normal*

Once you are moving around easier, most likely after the first four weeks following surgery, you can begin more extensive strengthening exercises. Which exercises are right for you depend on what type of surgery you had and whether your surgeon accessed your spine from your back, front or side. As a result, the strengthening exercises that are right for you may focus on your back, front or side.

Exercise is the key to recovering from back surgery. Strengthening the muscles affected by your surgery allows you to get back to a normal level of activity, avoid re-injuring yourself and increase your stamina. So do your prescribed exercises as often as you're told. You can get back to your normal daily routine given time, as long as you follow your back surgery rehab instructions.

## Chapter 2

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# *Rehabbing from Back Surgery*

## *What to Expect*

**B**ack in the day, as few as even 10 years ago, back surgery meant at least six weeks of bed rest and another six to eight weeks of painful, rehabilitative exercise. Back surgery rehab was a long-drawn-out process that you had to prepare for well in advance.



And while you may have to endure a long rehabilitation process that can last up to 12 weeks, thanks to advancements in minimally invasive techniques that the doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute (SSI) have perfected, your back surgery rehab often can begin after only one day of rest. Keep in mind, however, that everyone is different and every body reacts differently to surgery. The point is that back surgery does not have to keep you out of commission for long periods of time.

### *Tackling Back Problems from Many Different Angles*

Physicians who perform back surgery used to be compared to carpenters: they attacked every problem with a hammer. Today, the doctors and surgeons at SSI approach back problems with a multi-disciplined strategy. Every step is taken to avoid surgery. And when it's necessary, the very minimum of harm is done to the surrounding muscle tissues, nerves and bones.

Very often, your back pain can be treated with a same-day surgical procedure called a Micro Endoscopic Discectomy, which is performed on an outpatient basis. You can return home after a brief observation period. The procedure is so non-invasive, you can return to normal daily activities around the house within days. And depending on the type of work you do, you may be allowed to return within a week or two.

### *Back Surgery Rehab*

If you require surgery, your team of spinal medicine physicians at SSI closely monitors your rehabilitation. While the process may be slightly different for each patient, your rehabilitation likely will follow a safe, proven routine, as follows:

- Pain management is a priority because you can't perform the necessary rehabilitation exercises if you're suffering. In addition to medication, your rehab specialist may rely on:
  - Ice packs
  - Electrical stimulation (TENS)
  - Various recovery-oriented movements
  - Certain positions of your spine
- An individualized training program is designed to help you get back to your normal routine as quickly as possible. Back surgery rehab not only focuses on keeping your spine healthy, but also on rebuilding your muscle strength. Common means can include:
  - Exercises that target the muscles near your incision
  - Therapy for the muscles weakened before your surgery
  - Stabilization exercises for your lower back
- You'll learn the most appropriate exercises from your physical therapist and then continue them at home throughout your back surgery rehab process. Your therapist will design an exercise program that maximizes your recovery and usually refrains from any high-impact exercises like running. Common back surgery rehab exercises include:
  - Stationary bike
  - Walking
  - Isometrics
  - Ankle pumps



- Swimming
- Range of motion exercises
- Stretching
- Resistance bands

A few other tips to get you through your back surgery rehab:

- Tell your therapist or doctor when you feel pain
- Find a comfortable position that allows you to get sufficient sleep
- Follow your doctor's instructions closely
- Wear a brace if it's prescribed
- Eat a healthy diet that includes fiber, fruits and vegetables to avoid constipation

If you have further questions, contact SSI by email or give them a call at 866-774-6350.

## Chapter 3

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### *Recuperating at Home*

All the back surgery performed at the Southeastern Spine Institute (SSI) is same-day back surgery. That means you have the procedure as an outpatient — you arrive in the morning, have the operation and return home that evening. Most doctors agree that recuperating in your own home helps you heal quicker, as long as you follow your back surgeon’s instructions.



And you'll need help getting from the SSI campus to your home and again once you're home. Arrange to have friends, family or a nurse's aid available at your home at least during the first week after your same-day back surgery. You may need help getting out of bed, support while you walk around, a smiling face to clean up and a good cook to prepare your meals.

### *The First Week After Surgery*

Rule number one is to follow your doctor's instructions! When you're recuperating from same-day back surgery, especially during that first week, you must:

- Keep your incision clean so it can heal properly
- Get enough rest, which shouldn't be a problem
- Eat nutritious, high-fiber meals, not fast food
- Drink plenty of water
- Get up out of bed at least a couple times a day to walk

You'll probably be taking oral pain medication, so the more help you can get, the better. You may appreciate visitors too since you'll be confined to your house. To ensure everything runs smoothly, however, the time to arrange all this support is well before your same-day back surgery.

### *Practical In-Home Adjustments*

Since your mobility after surgery will be limited, make it easier on yourself by planning for your recovery. Here are some ways you can prepare your home to accommodate your recovery:

- Prepare meals in advance and then freeze them. Even if you have someone available to cook and clean, these meals make it easier and ensure that you eat food you like.

- Keep a heating pad and ice wrap handy or available. You may need both during your recovery.
- Purchase laxatives to keep in your medicine cabinet because constipation following surgery is common.
- Organize the multiple pills you may have to take — such as pain pills, vitamins and other medication — making sure they are easily identifiable. Don't make mistakes with medication.
- Install a toilet riser, a higher seat, to help you sit and get back up.
- Place a plastic chair in the shower. Your doctor may tell you not to take a bath, but standing in a shower can be painful.
- Rent, borrow or buy a walker or a cane to help you get around when you first get home. Keep one next to your bed.

Since you'll be bed-bound for the most part, consider what you'll need within reach:

- The TV remote
- Plenty of good reading material or puzzle books
- A back scratcher
- A tablet for email, games, music and Facebook
- A cell phone in case you have to call your doctor or want to talk to a friend
- Extra pillows

### *Recovering from Same-Day Back Surgery*

Even though you're at home, it's important to keep your spirits up. A positive attitude helps you heal faster. That's why you should have people visit. Your friends and family won't care if you're not

wearing makeup or fancy clothes; they want to see you get better. Social interaction keeps you from going stir crazy, especially if you're like many people who prefer to stay busy.

The last bit of advice is the same as the first: follow your doctor's instructions. You'll have to return to SSI for a follow-up exam and eventually start physical therapy. Just remember that your recuperation from same day back surgery may take months before you're 100 percent. Give yourself the time to heal as you work toward that goal.

## Chapter 4

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### *Physical Therapy Following Surgery*

If you've opted for back surgery or if your spinal medicine physician told you that you needed surgery, it likely means you've been experiencing acute back pain, possibly for a long time. Surgery on your spine is a delicate procedure, but at the Southeastern Spine Institute, you and your spine are in good hands. SSI has its own physical therapy department, so your care is coordinated from your first visit to your last.

After you've had surgery, it's time to heal. How long you need to rest before you can get up and start to exercise depends on the type of back surgery you've had and your physical condition prior to surgery. But back surgery rehab, including physical therapy, eventually will take you from your bed to your workplace, pain-free and better than ever.

#### *Back Surgery Rehab in General*

The SSI back surgeons perform outpatient procedures, so you get to recuperate in the comfort of your own home. All operations require at least a couple days of bed rest, meaning you're confined to your bed and may need help with meals and getting to the bathroom.

During this time, you'll take prescription medication, as prescribed by your spinal surgeon, to manage your pain and help you sleep.

Physical therapy always follows back surgery. Even after a minor operation, you can benefit from the advice and counsel of a qualified physical therapist. That's because the process involves as much education as physical exercise.



### *Physical Therapy in Back Surgery Rehab*

Once your pain is under control, and you can move about, it's time to get back onto your feet. Your physical therapist will work with you to stand, sit and move in a way that will not re-injure your back. These first few steps are crucial because they teach you how to keep yourself healthy. You may learn new things about your posture, your sleeping position and even your diet.

Depending on the type of condition you had and the surgical procedure you underwent, your physical therapist develops a series of exercises and stretches designed to heal and strengthen your back. Some muscles may have been weakened by the incision

or from a lifetime of abuse or neglect. It's your therapist's job to get you moving the right way by building up the muscles you need.

### *Specific Physical Therapy Goals*

You may have hurt your back, but often your hips, neck, shoulders and joints also were affected. Your back surgery resolved the damage done, but now you have to relearn how to hold yourself and how to move so that you don't damage another part of your spine. Unless you had a fusion procedure, in which two or more vertebrae are fused together, your flexibility will improve with post-surgical physical therapy.

Exercise unlocks that flexibility for you. Your physical therapist will devise a set of exercises that you should continue to do even after your therapy ends. Exercising and stretching become the new normal for you as you incorporate them into your lifestyle. Back surgery rehab also includes changes to your lifestyle and diet.

Follow the recommendations of your physical therapist. After suffering debilitating back pain and having to undergo a surgical solution, you do not want to return to that back pain. Physical therapy gets you back to work and to your normal life, but it's up to you to remain healthy, happy and pain-free.



## Chapter 5

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# *The Caretaker's Role in Your Recovery*

The key to a quick and complete recovery from any type of back surgery is planning. Your surgeon will explain what you can expect after your procedure, and you may have friends and family you can count on, but it's up to you to plan ahead. Taking care of the details before you have your surgery makes all the difference in your back surgery recovery.



Part of that planning involves making sure you have enough support — and the right kind of support. One or more caretakers, depending on your needs and the length of your expected recovery, will put your mind at ease and allow you to focus on getting well. And that’s essentially the caretaker’s role: letting you relax and heal, knowing that everything else is under control.

### *Arrange for a Caretaker Right Away*

Your back surgery recovery begins the day of your procedure. So have someone available — whether a family member, a good friend or a paid professional — that day. Since all the surgeries performed at the Southeastern Spine Institute (SSI) are outpatient procedures, you’ll need someone as soon as you’re released to help get you home, set up and comfortable.

You’ll definitely need help that first day, but a caretaker’s duties continue until you’re well enough to fend for yourself. Your caretaker(s) can be that friendly presence that you can count on, right from your first day home. Regardless of what other planning you do to prepare for your procedure, make sure you have the support of an able caretaker right from Day One of your back surgery recovery.

### *Caretaker as Caregiver*

A caretaker is really a caregiver; the two terms often are used interchangeably. The main thing to remember is that a caretaker (or caregiver) has to specialize in “care.” It helps if your caretaker knows what to expect during your recovery, from medical issues that might arise to your preference for movies, books or games. So share information from your surgeon and spell out your wishes regarding what you’ll want as you recover.

If your doctor wants you to get out of bed after that first day, your caretaker can help get you up and moving around. A good caretaker can devise a schedule that includes appropriate exercise and meals, managing your pain medication and arranging fun downtime. Recovery from back surgery is a serious matter, though, so follow your surgeon's instructions closely. Eventually, you may need to return to SSI for a follow-up exam or physical therapy.

### *Back Surgery Recovery Takes Time*

Measure your recovery in weeks or months, not days. Every day brings you closer to a complete recovery, but only if you do the work — such as the prescribed exercises to gain strength and heal fully. Armed with a schedule, your caretaker(s) can make sure you eat right, exercise regularly, get your meds on time and have enough distractions to help you through the long days. When you know you're in for the long haul, it truly helps to know you have someone you can rely on.

Until you gain enough strength and flexibility to manage for yourself, your caretaker(s) can assist with:

- Helping you into and out of bed
- Keeping your incision clean
- Getting to the bathroom
- Bathing and grooming
- Getting dressed
- Fixing your meals and cleaning up
- Running errands and grocery shopping
- Monitoring your medications
- Providing company

- Taking care of your pets
- Making sure you don't overexert yourself
- Keeping you positive and focused

A positive attitude improves your recovery time and helps motivate you through the difficult early days. A good caretaker has unlimited patience to calm you when you feel frustrated. And when you're in the midst of back surgery recovery, that patience is a blessing.

## Chapter 6

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# *Healing from Back Surgery as You Age*

**W**hen you receive a diagnosis, you may wonder first if you need surgery to correct the problem that's causing your back pain. Be assured that the spinal medicine doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute resort to surgery as a last resort. There are conditions, however, that require back surgery.



You may need back surgery if:

- You've undergone alternative treatment for six months or more with little or no relief
- You have a loss of bladder control
- You only have one or two discs that are degenerated
- You are young enough to withstand the procedure

While back surgery can prove effective for patients of any age, recovery tends to be more difficult when you're over 60 or in otherwise poor general health. For every senior, healing from surgery is slower than it is for younger patients. Your body needs to be able to deal with the rehabilitation, and elders are more susceptible to complications following back surgery.

### *Participate in Your Recovery*

You can take steps to reduce the risk of complications and improve the rate at which you heal after back surgery, no matter your age. Proper nutrition, for example, is vital to ensure rapid healing. Follow a healthful diet to optimize your recovery.

- Protein gives your body the building blocks its needs to regenerate damaged tissue. Include lean meats and fish in your daily diet.
- High doses of sugar can put you at a higher risk of developing an infection after back surgery.
- Counteract constipation, which is common after back surgery, by drinking sufficient fluids and eating food high in fiber such as beans, whole grains and raw vegetables and fruit.

The sooner you begin physical therapy, the faster you will recover. So even if it hurts, begin getting up and walking as instructed,

often the day after your surgery. Closely follow the doctor's physical therapy orders to avoid atrophy and a slower recovery.

### *The Joys of Aging*

The fact is that you become wiser as you get older — and your body processes slow down, especially when it comes to healing. And, for the most part, it is out of your hands. No amount of exercise or nutrition can counteract some of the effects of aging.

Wounds from surgery are slow to heal because your body produces less collagen, which is the source of tissue regeneration and cell development. Your bones rely on a gene called COX-2 that plays a significant role in bone formation. And this is yet another material that slows way down in production with age. Stem cell functions are compromised with age as well, which slows down the healing process following back surgery.

But all the news is not bad. With a rigorous post-surgery physical therapy process, as much as you can bear, and a healthy diet, you have a very good chance of recovering to live pain-free for many years. A positive attitude helps too, with age-appropriate expectations. You may feel great, but chances are you won't be tooling around town on a skateboard any time soon after back surgery.

## Chapter 7

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# *Walk to a Speedy Recovery After Surgery*

**R**ecovery from back surgery progresses differently for everyone. And yet, you share many aspects of back surgery recovery with others:

- Your body needs time for damaged tissue to heal.
- In time, you will return to normal activities.
- Time for recovery is a necessary part of rebuilding your strength.
- A positive attitude toward your recovery helps speed it up.

The rate of your recovery from back surgery depends on a variety of factors too, including:

- The type of surgery you had
- The state of your health prior to the surgery
- Your general fitness level
- Your muscle strength
- How bad your symptoms were before you underwent the procedure
- Your age



### *Basic Recovery Advice*

Follow the advice of your doctor as you begin your recovery from back surgery, both in the hospital and at home. One of your doctor's prescriptions will be a set of appropriate rehabilitation exercises aimed at getting you back to normal. Following those instructions can make all the difference in how quickly your recovery takes place.

In addition to getting you moving and healing, exercise has the added benefit of fostering an overall feeling of well-being. The release of endorphins, coupled with increased circulation, enhances your mood while healing your body.



### *Walking It Off*

Your doctor and rehabilitation specialist will encourage you to begin a progressive walking program as soon as possible after your surgery. In addition to preventing muscle atrophy, walking helps you prevent blood clots from developing. Walking also helps get

your bowels moving regularly again. Do as much walking as you can without putting undue stress on your body. Use a conservative approach.

While you are still in the hospital after surgery, you may be encouraged to walk once you are able. Do one lap around your ward three to six times a day. By day four, back at home, you should be walking for five full minutes, up to six times a day. Increase that to 10 minutes, three or four times a day by week two, and up to 15 minutes by week three.

By the sixth week following your surgery, you should be walking for 30 minutes twice a day. And that's a good habit to continue even when you're fully recovered.

### *Benefits for Recovery from Back Surgery*

Remaining active aids your successful recovery from back surgery. At the same time, you need to take care not to reinjure your back by overdoing it. Wear comfortable and safe shoes that provide sufficient support. Walk at a comfortable pace and avoid hills and stairs for the first few weeks. You'll notice the results quickly if you follow the instructions of your doctor and rehabilitative specialist.

Benefits may include:

- Improved muscle strength
- Less stress
- Better mood
- Regular bowel activity
- Easier breathing
- Healthy weight loss (if needed)
- Improved posture
- Better balance

Walking is a low-load activity, ideal for most people during recovery from back surgery. It is the least harmful to your back, does not require any special equipment and provides the most benefits compared to other forms of exercise. Eventually, you'll be able to return to your regular fitness regimen. By that time, you may appreciate the benefits of walking so much that you make it an integral part of your healthy lifestyle.

## Chapter 8

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# *Can a Cane Help or Hinder Your Recovery?*

The spine specialists at the Southeastern Spine Institute always try non-invasive treatment before considering surgery, but sometimes surgery is the best (or only) option. Once you and your spinal medicine physician have agreed on surgery to relieve your back pain, you should discuss what to expect during your back surgery rehab even before you enter the hospital.



During rehab, you'll be under enough physical and emotional stress. Stress following back surgery can be as debilitating as the surgery itself if you're not prepared. So before your operation, review the list of things to make your recovery easier with your spinal surgeon.

### *Back Surgery Rehab Tips*

The recovery process begins with an introduction to your physical therapist who'll help you return to full mobility with guidance from your doctor. You'll also have access to pain medication and detailed instructions about when to take it. And you'll need a list of items to have at home to make your back surgery rehab a little smoother, such as:

- Slip-on shoes with non-skid soles
- Ice packs
- Prune juice or other over-the-counter laxatives
- A grabber
- Heating pad
- Extra pillows
- Toilet set riser
- Shower chair
- Walker

Your rehabilitation specialist may add a few other items to your list, such as a set of stretch bands or a large Pilate's ball. Your insurance policy may cover many of these items, especially if your physician orders them. You may want additional items, however, even if they aren't prescribed. If this is the case, take a minute to call your back surgery rehab team to find out if an item will

adversely affect your recovery. One such controversial item is a cane.

### *Cane Pros and Cons*

After an initial period of rest, possibly just a few days after your surgery, your doctors will encourage you to get up and walk. Walking is one of the best exercises for your entire body. A cane can provide you with the stability you may need if you feel a bit unsteady on your feet after surgery. But using a cane may not be in your best interests. Consider the pros and cons:

A cane is:

- Relatively inexpensive
- Easy to carry with you into public places like a restaurant
- Easier to store than a clunky walker
- A fashionable accessory
- Often covered by insurance

A cane also:

- Requires instructions to use it properly
- Can be unsafe on certain surfaces
- Can slip out from under you, causing you to fall
- Can slow down your back surgery rehab by not allowing certain muscles to get stronger
- Eventually will change your gait if you use it too long

### *Consult a Specialist*

Discuss your concerns about balance and walking before your back surgery rehab begins so you can be properly prepared. The fewer appliances you have, the stronger you will become. But if you and

your doctor believe a cane can add the courage you need to get up and walk during your rehab, then by all means use one.

Just be prepared for the day your rehab specialist takes your cane away. You'll appreciate it later, when you can walk freely with no more back pain, even though those first few steps without your cane may be tentative. Remember that you'll return to full strength sooner when you choose to follow your doctor's orders.

## Chapter 9

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# *Massage After Back Surgery*

Any kind of back surgery, even minimally invasive surgery, is hard on your body. After a successful surgery, you want to heal and get back to your normal life as quickly as possible. Most people who undergo back surgery learn the recovery basics from their surgeon:

- Rest, then exercise a little bit at a time
- Have patience and don't overdo it
- Take pain medicine as prescribed
- Maintain a positive attitude

But more and more, the medical community is touting the health benefits of massage therapy as one piece of your back surgery recovery. Massage stimulates your blood flow, which speeds the healing process. Besides, it makes you feel good, even if you only get a massage on your extremities like your head, hands, arms, legs and feet.

### *The Benefits of Massage*

Massage in general has many health benefits, making it an especially helpful therapy for back surgery recovery. A therapeutic massage, which is gentler and more health-conscious than other



forms of massage, can help relieve pain. Massage has many other benefits too, including:

- Boosts your immune system
- Encourages oxygen and nutrients to move in your body
- Helps repair muscles affected by your surgery
- Increases the production of endorphins
- Eliminates muscle spasms
- Helps your skin recuperate from the surgery
- Improves your mood

You may find that a massage feels so good that you continue getting them even after your back surgery recovery is complete. While a weekly massage can do wonders for your health, you can enjoy the above benefits even from a monthly massage.



## *Post-Op Massage Concerns*

While you can't jump right from the operating table to the massage table, it's generally safe to begin massage sessions once your external incision point has healed fully. The incision area may feel tender for some time, so be sure to tell your massage therapist that you just had back surgery and where you're feeling tender.

An experienced therapeutic massage therapist won't cause you more pain. In fact, a good massage should help relieve your pain. Get recommendations for your massage therapist. Talk to him or her beforehand. It's important to find one who listens to you and doesn't try to do too much with you. But once you find that person, it's a relationship to treasure for years to come.

## *Your Back Surgery Recovery*

Take your recovery seriously. Follow your surgeon's instructions to the letter. Enlist your family and friends to help, especially immediately after your procedure. Remember that physical therapy can get you back on your feet with a minimum of discomfort. And massage can play a part as well.

Talk to your doctor. Ask your surgeon. Discuss it with your physical therapist. Each may have a different perspective, but all will agree that therapeutic massage is good for you in many different ways. So make massage part of your back surgery recovery.

## Chapter 10

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### *The Limitations After Back Surgery*

At the Southeastern Spine Institute, even back surgery is performed on an outpatient basis, so after an observation period, you get to return home to recuperate. But while you're bound to be more comfortable in your own home, you still need to follow your doctor's recommendations, especially during the first weeks of your recovery.

You'll definitely have physical limitations shortly after your surgery, but those limitations gradually ease as you gain strength and get back to your normal routines. Most limitations are common sense precautions to:

- Protect yourself from reinjuring your back
- Allow your body to heal properly
- Minimize your pain from the surgery

#### *Limitations in First Week*

The first week after your back surgery, you have to rest and heal. You won't be able to do much, but your doctor will encourage you to get up and walk around as much as you're able. You have to

keep the incision from your surgery clean and dry, so you can only shower if the incision is protected.

Even minimally invasive back surgery is still surgery, so take it easy. You should arrange to have a friend, family member or medical professional in your house to help you get around and prepare meals. By the end of the week, you should be feeling better. You can sit, stand and walk as much as you want, but do not stoop, bend or lift anything.



### *Limitations in the First Month*

During the first four weeks after your surgery, you heal and gain strength. Your doctor may allow you to return to work after three weeks if you have a desk job. You still shouldn't torque your back at all, and you must walk as much as possible to build strength. Once you're off pain medication, you can even begin driving again.

You may have a follow-up appointment with your doctor at the Southeastern Spine Institute. Your back is examined and you may be tested. Of course, the extent of your recuperation depends

largely on the type of back surgery you had done. The more intensive, the longer you can expect to have limitations.

At the three-week mark, your doctor may recommend physical therapy to strengthen particular muscles in your back and in surrounding areas that support your back. Physical therapy may involve three visits a week for three weeks. Your experience may vary, depending on your conditioning and your procedure.

### *Limitations After One Month*

In general, the first six weeks are the most critical for your recovery. After six weeks, your doctor usually gives you the green light to return to your normal routines. If you exercise, you should start slowly and gradually work up to your previous levels.

Remember that you haven't done any exercise except walking and PT for weeks. Expect to be sore, but you shouldn't feel any pain. If you do, contact your doctor immediately.

You may have other follow-up visits with your doctor at three months, six months and one year for testing to make sure your recovery is on target. Three or four months after your back surgery, your doctor may prescribe another round of physical therapy if he deems it necessary. By the eight-week mark, you should be free of any limitations, but you should continue to be aware of the right way to bend and lift.

## Chapter 11

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# *7 Tips to Prevent Falls After Surgery*

Whether you had surgery to repair the damage from a fall or it was necessary to fix long-term degeneration, your back surgery recovery depends largely on your staying upright and avoiding future falls. Preventing falls after surgery is tantamount to a safe and thorough recovery.



Your physician and physical therapist will insist that you begin walking as soon as possible as part of your back surgery recovery. So make note of the following tips aimed at reducing your risk of falls. These tips will make your recovery easier and more relaxing.

### *Home Sweet Home*

In the hospital, as part of your back surgery recovery, you'll get up close and personal attention when you begin moving around. Fall prevention is a major initiative at most facilities. You'll most likely use a walker and have attendants follow when you first get out of bed to walk.

It's when you get home that you may be more inclined to take shortcuts, thinking that you won't fall. But it's often when you least expect it that accidents happen. You trip, slip or tumble, only to break open stitches or worse, hurt your back again.

Make arrangements to prepare your home for your return before you even leave for the hospital. Your caregivers or helpers can assist once you're home.

1. Take loose throw rugs completely off the floor. If they are absolutely necessary, tape them down with two-sided rug tape. Pick up other items that are lying in the common path from room to room, such as electrical cords, magazine racks and shoes.
2. Move items that you use often — such as utensils, cups, dishes and napkins — to lower drawers and cabinets, making them easier to reach. You definitely need to avoid stretching too much or relying on step stools as you put together a meal or get a drink of water.
3. Keep rooms well lit at night or wherever there is too little outside light coming in. You may be slightly disoriented

during your back surgery recovery because of your pain medications. Rely on light, rather than your memory, to navigate the rooms in your home.

4. Board dogs or other pets. They may be so glad to see you that they jump up and knock you over or get underfoot and trip you. If you want to keep pets nearby during your back surgery recovery, place overactive pets in a crate when you're planning on moving around.
5. Leave your heels, sling-backs and clogs for later. Stick to wearing shoes with secure backs and non-skid soles during your back surgery recovery.
6. Until your physical therapist and doctor tell you otherwise, skip the long, hot baths and take showers. Use a shower chair if you feel unsteady. Tub baths are notorious for increasing the risk of twisting or bending your back inappropriately. And your risk of falling increases exponentially as you get in and out of the tub.
7. Continue walking and doing the exercises prescribed by your therapist, but add sufficient rest in between activities. Your body needs rest as much as movement during your back surgery recovery. You'll get stronger, leading to more control and balance to prevent falls.



## Chapter 12

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# *How to Avoid Going Back for More Surgery*

If conservative treatments for your back pain don't yield results, you must undergo back surgery to get back to your normal, healthy self. And while the Southeastern Spine Institute boasts some of the most experienced and competent back surgeons in the country to guide your recovery, you still have to endure two to 10 weeks of rehabilitation as you recover from back surgery.

Eventually, you'll be working and playing at 100 percent. After you recover from back surgery, however, you should take every suggestion and follow every guideline to prevent hurting yourself again. Back surgery and the ensuing recovery is not a picnic you want to attend more than once.

### *Recipe for Recovery*

To recover from back surgery fully and maintain your continued good health, develop a lifestyle that is best suited to your back problems and your previous illnesses. Your back surgeon and physical therapist provide a list of exercises ideal for your condition. Do them! The physical work strengthens the

surrounding muscles to support your spine and help you avoid further surgery.



Other strong recommendations:

- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever such as ibuprofen (if your primary doctor agrees) to tackle slight inflammation when you strain your back. Rest for a couple days to allow the swelling to subside.
- Maintain a healthy weight for your height and body type. Extra weight, especially around your mid-section, puts pressure on your already tender back. Lose the weight, eat a balanced diet and pay attention to your calcium intake — it's the mineral most likely to help you build strong spinal bones.
- Find a sleeping position, either on your back or on your side with a pillow between your knees, that places the least amount of strain on your back. And get sufficient sleep each

night. Lack of sleep causes stress that eventually affects your back.

- Develop a practice of daily stretching. Even if you're not an athlete, walking and moving around requires that your muscles are loose. Stretching in the morning prepares your body — and your back — for the day's activities. Stretching at night relieves your back of any strain you may have accumulated during the day.
- Don't smoke. Smoking reduces circulation in your body, and your back needs sufficient blood flow to stay healthy.
- Replace your old chairs with sturdy seats that provide lumbar support, especially if you have a desk job. Add other ergonomic accoutrements too, like an ergonomic keyboard, mouse and telephone headphones.
- Monitor how and how much you lift and carry at any one time. For example, if you carry a purse laden with heavy objects, your back will feel the stress. Lighten your load and consider a cross-body strap that doesn't place as much stress on one side or your back. Practice proper lifting techniques at all times.

### *Guarantees Are Difficult*

Even with the best spinal surgeons, the success rate for back surgery remains at about 95 percent, depending on your operation. No matter how diligent you are as you recover from back surgery, there is a slight chance that you'll continue to experience back pain. The most common reason is that your diagnosis was incorrect, so you may have to undergo additional tests and another surgery to make it right.

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For more information on preventing back pain and avoiding spinal surgery, contact the specialists at the Southeastern Spine Institute:

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