

# Taking Care of Yourself After Your

# *Lumbar Fusion*

## **How your bones heal**

The first 6 months after lumbar fusion surgery, your body will be healing the bones and muscles that were stretched and manipulated during surgery. Your surgeon may have used screws, plates and rods to brace the back while it heals. However, this does not hold the back forever. Your body's own bone is necessary for a permanent and solid fusion.

The best way to promote the healing process is to rest your back and to limit physical activity of the fused areas. Even common activities can produce these kinds of stresses. For example, jumping, running, bending forward, lifting from the waist, and sitting in one place for too long causes extra stress on your spine. Ten to 15 percent of fusion surgeries have poor bone healing. Much of the risk appears within the first few months. This is the reason you need to limit certain activities after surgery. See below.

Certain medications and substances have been shown to inhibit bone healing. You must NOT use:

- Cigarettes, cigars or other tobacco products (including nicotine patches).
- Ibuprofen, naprosyn and "NSAIDs." These have been associated with slow bone healing and lower fusion rates. Talk to your doctor if you use these medications. Aspirin is not a problem and can be taken after surgery.

An overall healthy diet can promote healing. To promote bone growth during the healing period, some surgeons recommend:

- Extra calcium: 500 milligrams per day.
- Vitamin D: 800 to 1,200 international units (IU) per day.

## **First Month**

### **Less leg pain**

Over the first month after surgery, you should find relief from your leg pain. For some people, the numbness and weakness may last for several more weeks or months. This usually depends on how injured nerve was before surgery. In many cases, tingling and "memory" pain can arise, particularly 7 to 10 days after the operation even if the surgery was effective in relieving the pain initially.

Pain from your incision will also fade. If you had extensive surgery, the muscles in your back were stretched and pulled during the procedure. This can be painful but the pain should fade each week. You can stretch and relax them by making sure that you keep your back straight when you stand, sit, walk or lie down.

On average, it takes about 6 to 12 months for bones to heal completely.

## Call your doctor if

- You have new weakness, numbness or tingling down your arms or legs.
- Your pain becomes severe.

## Wear brace to protect your back

Protect your healing back by being careful what you do:

- **Let your body be your guide!**
- Consider using **trekking poles** to help with keeping your balance and protecting your spine. These look like ski poles and are adjustable. Talk with your doctor and physical therapist to see if they would work for you.
- You can **sit** for 30 minutes then stand or change positions. See (sitting instructions on page 40).
- You can walk and **stand** throughout the day. Rest at least every hour by sitting or lying down.
- **Don't lift** or carry more than 5 to 10 pounds – about a gallon of milk. Keep what you are carrying close to your body to prevent stress on your spine. Squat and lift with the knees, and bend at the hips.
- There are no limitations on **reclining**.

- **Don't go jogging** or running.
- **No vacuuming.**
- **No gardening.**

**Driving** is permitted when you are no longer on pain medications and can safely control your car.

You can **ride** in a car as a passenger as long as you are reclined. Get out and stretch every 60 to 90 minutes.

**Sexual activity:** Ask your doctor when it will be safe to resume intimacy. In general, let your body be your guide.

## Second and Third Months

### What you can do

With your doctor's permission, you can return to your previous activities as you feel you are able to.

The best way to prevent future back problems is to reduce stress on your spine by:

- Maintaining a healthy weight.
- Paying attention to how you are lifting, sitting and standing.
- Keeping your abdominal muscles in shape.

Talk to your regular doctor about a safe diet and exercise plan.

## After the Third Month

Continue to follow up with your doctor. Depending on your surgery and your recovery, the doctor will make recommendations on how long you will wear a brace.

As always, call if you have questions about your recovery or these instructions.