

# Taking Care of Yourself After Your

# *Anterior Cervical Disc Fusion*

## **How your bones heal**

The first 6 months after 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 neck forever. Your body's own bones are necessary for a permanent and solid fusion.

The best way to promote the healing process is to rest your neck and to limit physical activity on the fused areas. Even common activities can produce these kinds of stresses. For example, jumping, running, bending your neck forward for too long causes extra stress on your neck. 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**

### **Throat tenderness**

Your throat may be sore, your voice may be sore or you may have difficulty swallowing after surgery. These symptoms may last from one to four weeks. This is common and should not cause you to worry.

## **Less arm pain**

Your arm pain should begin to fade during your hospital stay. Numbness and weakness can last for several more weeks or months, depending on how much the nerve was compressed.

During the first month after surgery, the muscles of your neck will heal. The best thing you can do to help the healing is to avoid stress on your neck. A week after surgery, you should exercise your neck by slowly going through the normal range of motion each day to prevent stiffness. This will become easier with time and should be nearly normal by one month after surgery.

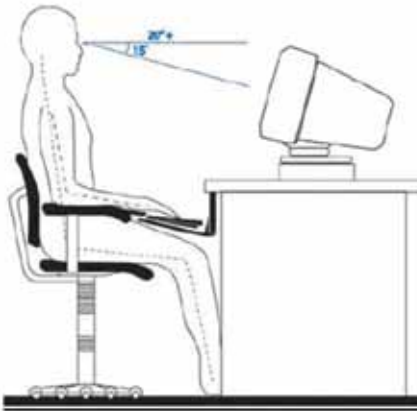
The pain from the incision should decrease in the first month as the muscles heal from surgery. In many cases tingling and "memory" pain can arise, particularly 4 to 7 days after the operation, even if the surgery was effective in relieving the pain initially. This is a common and is likely related to swelling of the nerve. This is usually not permanent.

## Call your doctor if

- You have new weakness, numbness or tingling down your arms or legs.
- Your pain becomes severe. It may be possible to relieve swelling with medications.
- Your swallowing problems interfere with your ability to breathe or drink water.

## What you can do

- There are no limitations on **walking**, but be careful not to bounce or walk on uneven ground. Start with a short distance and gradually increase to 1 to 2 miles every day.
- **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.
- Do not do any housework or yard work until after your first doctor visit. This includes gardening, mowing, vacuuming, ironing and loading/unloading the dishwasher, washer or dryer.
- When you occasionally **bend** over a sink, bend at your hips and knees.
- There are no limitations on **reclining** but be sure to get up every hour.
- **Don't go jogging or running.**
- You can **sit** for 30 minutes then stand or change positions. See (sitting instructions on page 40).



Your reading materials or computer monitor should be near or just slightly below eye level.

- When you **read**, place the materials near eye level (15 degrees below the horizon) to reduce stress on your neck.
  - When you use a **computer**, make sure the screen is at eye level. Keep the keyboard in a neutral position with your elbows bent at 90 degrees.
  - Ask your doctor when **sexual activity** is safe for your spine.
- Driving** is permitted after two weeks WITH YOUR COLLAR, if you are no longer on pain medications and your doctor gives permission.

## 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. Talk with your regular physician about a safe diet and exercise plan.

### Follow up

Make a follow-up appointment one month after your surgery. Three months after surgery, your doctor will want a CT scan or an X-ray to make sure the bone has fused.

### Returning to work

Most patients do not return to work until at least 3 weeks after surgery.

Some people are able to carefully change their work environment and can go back sooner. However, most patients are better off returning to light duty only after a full 4 weeks of recovery. The limitations for activities detailed above apply to both the work place and home.