

Neck Dissection - Post Operative Instructions

Surgery

Neck dissection involves general anesthesia, typically for several hours. This surgery is sometimes performed with removal of a lesion in the throat or mouth, or with tonsillectomy. Patients may be sedated for several hours after surgery and may remain sleepy for much of the day. You may have nausea or vomiting, but it usually goes away by the evening of surgery without additional medication. Most patients stay 1-2 nights in the hospital after surgery. Patients will have drains in place after surgery. These are most often removed before going home from the hospital.

Incision

Your incision will have staples, glue or sutures. You can shower and wash your hair as usual starting 24 hours after your last drain is removed. You may wash in a bathtub if you are careful not to get your neck wet. Use a dab of Bacitracin ointment on your drain site before and after showering for the first time. It is normal to have some red or pink drainage from your drain exit site for 1-2 days after the drain is removed.

Do not soak or scrub the incision. You might notice bruising around your incision or upper chest and slight swelling above the scar when you are upright. You may have numbness of the skin around the incision and the lower ear on the side of surgery. This will go away slowly after surgery except on the earlobe, where some patients have permanent numbness. Be very careful when shaving if your neck skin is numb. In addition, the scar may become pink and hard. This hardening will peak at about 3 weeks and may result in some tightness, which will disappear over the next 2 to 3 months.

You should apply sunscreen on your incision site starting 3 weeks after surgery EVERY day for the first year after surgery. This will prevent a red or pink scar and give you the best cosmetic result for your scar. A daily moisturizer with sunscreen (example Oil of Olay with SPF 15) is fine.

Limitations

You should not lift more than 10 pounds for 3-4 weeks after surgery – this will cause pain and stretching at the surgery site and incision. You should not drive or drink alcohol while taking pain medications. Most people can return to work/school 2 weeks after surgery, but there may be physical limitations as far as what you may do while at work. Your surgeon will review your specific limitations and release you when you are ready to return to work.

Medication

Pain medication can be used for pain as prescribed. Pain is expected after surgery. Your neck will be sore, and pain will be worse when the neck is stretched and when you swallow. Do not let this keep you from moving your neck gently in all directions. As the surgical site heals, pain will go away over 7-10 days. It is not uncommon for pain to get worse when you first go home because your activity may increase. From that point on, the pain should improve every day. Pain medications can cause nausea, which can be prevented if you take them with food or milk.

You may be given a stool softener (Colace) because pain medications may make you constipated. It is recommended that you use these starting right after surgery – you may discontinue if you find that you are having normal or loose stools.

Bacitracin ointment may be prescribed if your wound was not closed with skin glue. You should apply sunscreen on your incision site starting 3 weeks after surgery EVERY day for the first year after surgery. This will prevent a red or pink scar and give you the best cosmetic result for your scar. A daily moisturizer with sunscreen (example Oil of Olay with SPF 15) is fine.

Take all of your routine medications as prescribed, unless told otherwise by your surgeon. Any medication that thins the blood should be avoided until directed by your surgeon to resume them. These include aspirin and aspirin-like products (Advil, Motrin, Excedrin, Alleve, Celebrex, Naproxyn).

Pain

The main complaint following neck surgery is pain with swallowing and neck movement. Some people experience a dull ache, while others feel a sharp pain. This should not keep you from eating or moving your neck gently. Depending on what other procedures were performed at the same time (particularly in the mouth or throat), you may have diet restrictions.

Cough

If your operation was done under general anesthesia, you may feel like you have phlegm in your throat or a sore throat. This is usually irritation caused by a tube in your windpipe while you were asleep. You will notice that if you cough, very little phlegm will come up. This should clear up in 4 to 5 days.

Reasons to Call Your Surgeon's Office

- Persistent fever over 101° F
- Bleeding from the neck incision
- Increasing neck swelling
- Pain that is not relieved by your medications
- Drainage of pus from the incision
- Redness surrounding the incision that is worsening or getting bigger
- Bleeding is possible after surgery, and the most serious cases may cause trouble breathing. Symptoms include rapid swelling in the neck, trouble breathing, and red and purple discoloration of the skin over the incision. Please call doctor immediately, or if trouble breathing is present, call 911 or go to the closest emergency room