

Thyroid / Parathyroid Surgery - Post Operative Instructions

Surgery

Thyroid or parathyroid surgery involves general anesthesia, typically for 1 to 2 hours. 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. Most patients stay one night in the hospital and are discharged the next day. Sometimes, patients can go home the evening of surgery. Some patients will have a drain in place after surgery – this is most often removed the following day before you go home from the hospital.

Incision

Your incision is closed with absorbable sutures and is covered with a small strip of skin glue. Do not remove this glue. You can shower and wash your hair as usual starting 24 hours after surgery. 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 2 days after surgery. 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. In addition, the scar may become pink and hard. This hardening will peak at about 3 weeks and may result in some tightness or difficulty swallowing, 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

Limit your activity for the next 24 hours. You may then gradually resume your usual activities as you feel up to it. No heavy lifting or pushing, active sports, strenuous exercise, or heavy household work for 2 weeks. Objects that cannot be lifted with one hand are considered too heavy. You may walk and do light household activities. You may plan to return to work in 1 to 2 weeks, or as instructed.

Medication

Pain medication should be used 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. As the surgical site heals, pain will go away over the course of a week. 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.

If you were taking thyroid hormone tablets before your operation, you will continue this after surgery. Sometimes the dose will be changed by your surgeon. If you were not taking thyroid hormone prior to your operation, your surgeon will prescribe these tablets following surgery if the entire thyroid is removed. During your post-operative visits, you may have a blood test to measure your levels of thyroid hormone and your dose of medication may be adjusted accordingly.

If you had parathyroid surgery or a total thyroidectomy, you may be instructed to take extra calcium supplements until your blood calcium levels stabilize. These have to be purchased “over-the-counter” at a drug store. Generic brands are fine. Calcium carbonate is fine unless you take any medications for GERD, in which case you should buy Calcium Citrate with vitamin D instead of the other types of calcium. Your surgeon will instruct you on which type of calcium supplement to purchase and how many tablets to take.

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

Pain

The main complaint following thyroid 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 anything you want, and will improve daily after surgery.

Voice

Your voice may go through some temporary changes with fluctuations in volume and clarity (hoarseness). Generally, it will be better in the mornings and "tire" toward the end of the day. This can last for differing periods of time but should clear in 8 to 10 weeks.

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.

Hypocalcemia

In some patients who have thyroid and parathyroid surgery, the parathyroid glands do not function properly immediately after thyroid surgery. This is usually temporary and causes the blood calcium level to drop below normal (hypocalcemia). Symptoms of hypocalcemia include numbness and tingling of your lips (like they fell asleep), in your hands and in your feet. Some patients experience a "crawling" sensation in the skin, muscle cramps or headaches. These symptoms appear between 24 and 72 hours after surgery. It is rare for them to appear after 72 hours. If this happens, take 2 extra calcium tablets. If the symptoms do not go away within one hour, you should call your doctor. If this happens during the business day, call your surgeon's office. If this happens in the evening or over the weekend, go to the ER so your blood calcium levels can be checked.

Bone Health

Patients who are taking thyroid hormone tablets or who have a history of parathyroid disease should take 1000 - 1200 mg of calcium daily, and 200 to 400 IU of vitamin D daily to promote healthy bones. In addition to these supplements, an exercise routine using weights is also recommended.

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. 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