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The spine is a stack of bones that runs down the middle of your back. It starts at the bottom of your skull and goes all the way down to your tailbone. The spine:

- supports your body
- allows you to move freely.
- houses and protects the spinal cord—the nerve center of your body.

View of the spine from the front

The spine has 26 bones

- There are 24 bones (vertebrae) that start at the top of your spine. These are the separate bones that connect like puzzle pieces. There are:
  - 7 vertebrae in the neck area (cervical)
  - 12 vertebrae in the chest area (thoracic)
  - 5 vertebrae in the lower back (lumbar)
- The next to the last bone of your spine is the sacrum. The sacrum is actually 1 large bone made of 5 fused bones.
- The bone at the very end of the spine is the tailbone (the coccyx).
There are discs between most of the bones in the spine

There are soft pads of tissue between most of the vertebrae in your spine. These are called discs. The only vertebrae that do not have a disc between them are the top 2.

Details about the discs

• Each disc has a spongy center (nucleus) and a tougher outer ring (annulus). Movement in the nucleus is what makes it possible for the vertebrae to rock back and forth on the disks. This gives you the flexibility you need to bend and move.

• The discs absorb shock caused by movement.

• The discs also keep the bones from rubbing up against each other when you move.

Cross-section of a vertebra and disc
The spine has 3 natural curves

A healthy spine with proper alignment has 3 natural curves: cervical, thoracic, and lumbar.

- These curves keep your body balanced.
- These curves support your body when you move.
- These curves distribute weight through the spine, making back injuries less likely.

Muscles support the curves of the spine

Strong, flexible back muscles help support the curves of your spine. They do this by holding the vertebrae and discs in correct alignment. Strong and flexible belly, hip, and leg muscles also help support your back.
The spinal cord runs through the middle of your spine

- The spinal cord is the nerve center of your body.
  - It runs through the center of your spine
  - It connects your brain to the rest of your body.
  - It starts at the base of your brain and usually ends at the first or second lumbar vertebrae.
- All along the spine and at the end of the spine are nerve roots.
  - Nerve roots exit and enter the spinal canal on both the left and right sides and the end of the spine.
  - The job of the nerve roots is to carry electrical signals to and from the spinal cord and the muscles, organs, and other parts of your body.
Spinal Fusion Surgery

Why do I need spinal fusion surgery?

Compression or squeezing on the nerves in your spinal cord or on your nerve roots may be causing many of the different types of problems you are having. These problems may include back pain, leg pain, weakness in the legs, numbness in the legs. More serious symptoms include problems with bowel or bladder function.

How does a spinal fusion work?

During a spinal fusion, 2 or more of the bones in your spine are joined or “welded” together. Bones are joined with bones grafts. Your surgeon may also use instruments to hold the bones in place. Bones are fused to limit how much they move. This may help lower your pain or fix other problems you are having. The part of the spine that is fused and how many bones you will have joined depends on the problems you are having.

**Parts of the spine that may be fused include:**

- vertebrae in the neck (cervical fusion)
- vertebrae in the mid-back (thoracic fusion)
- vertebrae in the lower back (lumbar fusion)

Fusion can be done from the front side of the body or the back side of the body. Your surgeon will decide which is best for you.
How do bone grafts work?

To fuse the spine, very small pieces of extra bone are needed. This is called a bone graft. The bone that is attached to the spine act like a “cement” that fuses the vertebrae together. The fusion eliminates motion between the two fused vertebrae. This means you will have a slight loss in flexibility, but you may feel like you can move better after surgery because your problem has been fixed.

Are there different kinds of bone grafts?

There are many different types of bone grafts. Two of the more common types are grafts from a patient’s own body (autograft) and grafts from a bone bank (allograft). There are also artificial bone graft materials that can be used.

**Autografts**

Bone from your own spine will always be used to join your vertebrae together. Your surgeon may also need to use bone from your hip to make the fusion. If bone from your hip is used, a small amount will be taken from a part of your pelvic bone, called the iliac crest. The bone that is used for the graft will be removed during your spinal fusion surgery—a separate procedure is not needed. Bone may be taken through the incision made for your fusion, or through a separate incision. Your surgeon will talk with you about all of this before your surgery.

**Allografts**

Sometimes bone from people who have died is used in spinal fusion surgery. This bone is collected, tested, and stored in bone banks. Bone donors are checked for their cause of death and medical history. Tests are done to check for viruses such as HIV and hepatitis. The bone is also treated before it is used as a graft. The risk of getting a disease from bone graft is extremely low. Your surgeon will talk with you if they decide to use bone from a donor in addition to your own bone.

**Genetically engineered protein (BMP) grafts**

A genetically engineered protein (BMP) may also be used create your fusion. The use of BMP will be discussed with you if your surgeon feels this would be helpful in your situation.

How do the bone grafts stay in place?

**Spinal fusions with instrumentation**

A bone graft takes time to completely grow into the bone and become stable. Most fusions include the use of instruments to hold the bones in place while the graft fuses together. In this type of fusion, your surgeon puts rods, screws, hooks, or wires (normally just rods and screws) in your vertebrae. They are placed in a way that will keep the spine stable while it heals. The screws are generally made of titanium. The rods are made of either titanium or cobalt-chrome.

**Spinal fusions without instrumentation**

Sometimes, spinal fusions are done without any instruments. These fusions only use the bone grafts. This means your surgeon will join your bones together by using nothing other than added bone graft material. This method is used when putting instruments into the spine may cause more harm than good. This can be the case when the bone is weak or is poor quality.
What are the benefits of a spinal fusion?

Most people who have back surgery do so to lessen the pain and symptoms that are caused by their back problems. Some benefits of a successful spinal fusions include:

- less pain in the back and legs
- less weakness or numbness in the legs
- the ability to be more active and gain a better quality of life
- improved physical fitness
- better mood
- increased productivity, including being able to return to work or other activities.

What are the risks of a spinal fusion?

Like any surgery, a spinal fusion has its risks. However, your surgeon would not recommend this procedure for you unless the expected benefits far outweighed the risks.

Risk of bad pain after surgery

Expect that you will have pain after surgery. In fact, this can be a very painful procedure. Every movement you make will send sensation into the muscles in your back. Patients have used words such as “I feel like I’ve been beaten up.” Often, patients will notice they have pain in areas besides their backs. These pains are most likely caused by your body being in an awkward position during surgery. The good news is that these pains will subside. The worst pain typically lasts for 2 to 4 weeks. Thereafter, the pain will slowly lessen. It is possible that you will have some pain that last for as long as 3 to 6 months.

Other minor risks of spinal fusion

In addition to pain, you spine surgery has other minor risks. These are easily treated, and you should think of them as “bumps in the road” that will not affect your long-term recovery. We cannot predict every possible thing that may happen. The most common minor risks are:

- muscle soreness and painful pressure areas, especially in the area of the chest
- skin numbness on the back near the incision
- wound infection on the surface of your skin
- bladder infection
- constipation or temporary slowing of your bowel function
- nerve irritation, such as pain, numbness, and weakness that comes and goes
- blood clots in your leg
- spinal fluid leak or a dural tear
- breathing and lung problems
- confusion or dementia from anesthesia or narcotic pain medicine.
**Major risks of spinal fusion**

Major risks of spinal fusion are very rare but include:

- neurologic problems, up to and including paralysis
- blood clots traveling to your lungs (called pulmonary embolism)
- Deep wound infection that requires surgery or IV antibiotics
- failure of the bones to fuse together (called pseudarthrosis) or instrumentation that breaks or pulls out of the bone
- other major medical problems, including stroke, heart attack, and even death.

**Risks of anesthesia:**

You will have general anesthesia during your surgery. The goal of general anesthesia is to make you sleep through your surgery and not feel any pain. General anesthesia is different from regional anesthesia, where only part of your body is numbed and you may be awake.

Risks of general anesthesia include:

- throat discomfort
- injury to teeth or dental work
- harm to the eyes, including blindness
- damage to your vocal cords, which may affect your ability to speak
- headache
- backache
- nerve damage
- being aware during surgery
- allergic reactions
- stroke
- heart attack
- death
Getting Ready for Surgery

To have the best possible surgery, there are things you will need to know and do to get ready in the weeks before. Let us know if you have any questions or need any help.

Get your vaccines

Plan ahead. If you need to get a live-virus vaccine and your surgery is still more than 6 weeks away, you should have your vaccines now. Though you can get a flu shot with an inactivated virus at any time, you cannot get any live-virus vaccines within 6 weeks of your surgery or for 3 months after your surgery.

Start taking Calcium/Vitamin D

Start taking a Calcium 1500 mg with Vitamin D 1000 IU vitamin as soon as possible before your spine surgery. Plan to be on it for a minimum of 6 months after surgery, but consider remaining on it year round pending no medical contraindications.

If you smoke, quit!

You must not smoke any time around your surgery—before or after. Quit as soon as you know you will have surgery. Smoking raises the risk of medical problems from surgery, including risk of infection in any instruments used in your spine and the risk that your bones and incisions won’t heal.

Go to any appointments or have tests done if we require them

Before your surgery it may be necessary to have blood, a urinalysis, an EKG, and/or a chest x-ray completed. You will be asked to schedule an appointment with your primary care physician 2-4 weeks away from your surgery. They can perform most of the required testing. You may have to go see other specialists such as a cardiologist for additional screening prior to your surgery. Our surgery coordinator will assist you in scheduling any appointments needed.

An appointment will also be scheduled for you to meet with a physical therapist prior to surgery. The therapist will go over post-operative instructions as well as restrictions.

Before your surgery, you will be receiving a call from one of our pre anesthesia testing nurses. They may also schedule you an appointment to meet with them in person.

• the nurse will verify instructions and inform you of the time you need to report for surgery
• it is important that we have your current contact information. This includes home, cell, or work phone numbers as well as your email address
• be prepared to review your medications and past medical history
• be sure you tell this person about vitamins and drugs such as marijuana and cocaine
• if you struggle with constipation prior to the surgery talk to the pre anesthesia testing nurse for suggestions to prevent complications.
• you may take your morning pills as instructed by the pre anesthesia testing nurse. Take pills with no more than 1 tablespoon of water.
• if you have questions about anesthesia before the day of your surgery the pre anesthesia testing nurse can help provide answers
Call us if you get any kind of infection

If you get any kind of infection before your surgery, you need to call the surgery coordinator right away. An infection could move into your spine after surgery and cause serious problems. If you still have infection the day of your surgery, your surgery will need to be cancelled in order to keep you safe and healthy.

Call us if you develop:

• an infection of your teeth
• an infection of your fingernails or toenails
• a bladder infection
• a pimple, cut, scratch, boil, abscess, or insect bite anywhere on your body—even especially on the skin over or around the area of your back that will be operated on
• a rash or flaky skin
• a temperature higher than 100.5°F (38.1°C).

Exercise to stay strong

The stronger and more fit you are before your surgery, the better you will do after. Activities we suggest are walking, swimming and deep breathing exercises. Cardiac and aerobic exercises are also helpful if they are approved by your medical doctor and you are able to do them. You may want to work with a physical therapist or personal trainer to get as strong as you can.

Eat healthy foods to stay strong

Include fruits, vegetables, and whole grains in your diet. A healthy diet will help you have a better recovery.

Start planning for your recovery at home

Unless your doctor decides there is a medical reason for you to go to another facility, you can expect to go to your home after surgery. Patients get better faster when they go home to recover since it is helpful to heal in familiar surroundings. Start getting your home ready now, and make your recovery as easy as it can be.

Make your home safe and easy to move around in

Set up your home now so it will be as easy as possible for you to live in as you recover. Remember, as you recover you will not be able to bend, lift, twist, or stoop down. You will be very limited in your movement after surgery and need to prepare your home for this.

• Make sure you have a cordless phone or cell phone that you can reach easily.
• Cook and freeze meals in advance. Or buy frozen dinners and canned fruits and vegetables. This way, you won’t have to worry about doing a lot of cooking.
• Buy heavy or awkward things now before your surgery. This might include dish soaps, detergents, toilet paper, peanut butter, pet food, and heavy jars or cans.
• Store the kitchen items you use the most at counter-top level, above your waist, and below your shoulders.
Arrange your home to prevent falls

For the first few weeks after surgery, you will likely need to use a walker or cane (or both). Move your furniture so you have a clear path and will be able to use your walker or cane wherever you need to go.

• Pick up any clutter off the floor so you don’t trip or hurt yourself.
• Remove any area rugs in your home so you won’t trip over them.
• Tape down all electrical cords so you don’t trip over them.
• Put shower grab bars in the shower, and put rubber mats in the bathtub and shower. More falls happen in the bathroom than any other room in the house.
• Consider installing handrails on stairs in or outside of your house before your surgery.
• If your bedroom is on an upper-level floor, think about setting up a bed on the first floor of your home to use as you recover.
• Keep the items you use often within easy reach.
• Get a rolling cart to help you move items without having to carry them.
• If you have pets, make arrangements to get help feeding and taking care of them since your movement will be so limited.

Arrange for a caregiver

It is important that you have one or more caregivers to help you as you recover. Now is the time to ask family, friends, or others you know if they can help you once you leave the hospital. You will need help with housework, errands, and driving. Remember that you will not be able to drive for 6 weeks after surgery. You also will not be able to drive for as long as you are taking your prescription pain medicines.

After surgery, you will need help with:

• getting to and from the hospital, physical therapy, and doctor appointments
• going to the bathroom and showering
• grocery shopping and meals
• keeping the house clean and safe for you to walk in
• caring for small children and pets.

For the first 2 weeks after surgery, it is best if someone can stay with you at night.

Fourteen days before surgery, do these things

Stop drinking any beer, wine, liquor, and all other alcohol drinks.
Seven days before surgery, do these things

Seven days before your surgery, stop taking the medicines listed below. Taking the wrong medicine too close to surgery, can keep you from having your surgery. It could also cause complications.

Important: Please consult with the doctor prescribing your blood thinner to make sure they think it is safe for you stop this medication. If one of your doctors thinks it is not safe for you to stop any of these medicines, you must talk to the surgeon!

Seven days before surgery, stop taking these prescription medicines:

- blood thinners, such as Coumadin, Xarelto, and Eloquis
- all anti-inflammatory prescriptions, such as Clinoril, Indocin, Daypro, Toradol and Celebrex
- bone strengthening medicine, including Fosamax and Reclast.

If you take insulin or prednisone you may have to adjust your medicines before surgery. Make sure to tell your surgeon about all the medicines you are currently taking.

Seven days before surgery, stop taking these over-the-counter medicines:

- aspirin
- ibuprofen
- Advil
- Motrin
- Aleve
- Naprosyn (naproxen)
- any other medicines that contain aspirin, ibuprofen, or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (called NSAIDs) that you can buy with or without a prescription.
- aspirin may be continued if you have certain heart conditions, please talk to your primary care provider, cardiologist or pre anesthesia testing nurse.

Seven days before surgery, stop taking these herbals and supplements:

- Chrondroitin
- Danshen
- Feverfew
- Fish Oil
- Garlic tablets
- Ginger tablets
- Ginko
- Ginseng
- Quilinggao
- Vitamin E
- Co Q10
- Multivitamins
Three days before surgery, do these things

• Get everything ready to go to the hospital. Plan to bring only a few clothes and the personal care items you need, including:
  – a short, lightweight robe
  – loose fitting clothes with elastic waistbands that you can easily put on when you get ready to leave the hospital
  – t-shirts
  – shoes or slippers with a closed back and non-skid soles
  – eyeglasses, if you need them
  – a hairbrush, if you need it.

• Do not pack any valuables. You should leave all your valuables at home.

• Bring a list of all the medicines you currently take. But do not pack any of your medicines. Just bring the list.

The night before surgery, do these things

• Remove any nail polish from your fingers and toes.

• If you shower or bathe the night before your surgery, do not apply lotions, moisturizers, powders, or makeup to your body or face after your shower or before you go to bed.

• Do not eat or drink anything after midnight on the night before surgery. That means no gum, hard candy, or water. This is to prevent stomach upset and vomiting that can be caused by anesthesia.

The day of surgery, do these things

• If you shower or bathe the morning of your surgery, do not use any lotions, moisturizers, powders, or makeup to your body or face after you wash.

• You may brush your teeth. But only use a small amount of water. Spit the water out.

• You may take your morning pills. But take your pills with no more than one tablespoon of water. Pills you may take include medicines for your heart, blood pressure, or breathing.
At the Hospital

Go to the admission desk when you arrive

Go through the front doors of the hospital and check in at the front desk in the lobby.

Remember: The time your surgery begins may change. Much depends on the when the last surgery finished. Sometimes your surgery can start as much as a few hours later than the scheduled time. Thank you for understanding.

When you come to the hospital, leave these things at home

• Do not bring your cane, crutches, or walker when you first come to the hospital. (Have your cane, crutches, or walker brought to you the last day of your hospital stay when you will need a walking aide for your trip home.)

• Do not bring large amounts of money or valuable items, such as jewelry.

After you have checked in, we will take you to the Holding Room (Pre-op)

• After you have checked in at the admission desk, someone will take you to pre-op.

• You may bring your friends or family with you space permitting. You will change into a hospital gown. You will give your clothes and anything else, like dentures, glasses or contact lenses, hairpins, or jewelry, to your support person to take care of while you are in surgery.

• We will put an IV into your arm. An IV is a tube that goes through your skin and puts medicine directly into your body.

• You will meet with your anesthesia team. They will talk with you about your medical history. They may start managing your pain by giving you some pills to take by mouth with a tiny sip of water.

• We will take you to the operating room on a stretcher.

• If you feel anxious or tense at any time, tell your nurse.
Surgery

• From pre-op, we will take you to the operating room. The staff members who are working with your surgeon and the anesthesiologists will prepare you for your surgery. You probably will not see your surgeon at this time. You will be given general anesthesia. Once you are asleep and about 30 to 60 minutes after you go to the operating room, your surgery will begin.

• When you surgery is finished, it usually takes 30 to 60 minutes to wake you up and put you on the hospital bed before you are taken out of the operating room.

• When your surgery is finished, the surgeon will speak with your family.

What happens during surgery

Anesthesia

Anesthesia is medicine that we will use before and during surgery to keep you from having pain during surgery. It will also relax you, limit your awareness of what is happening around you, and make you sleep. Anesthesia is part of your surgery. We will create a pain control plan just for you that is based on your personal needs and medical history.

The procedure

First, a vertical incision will be made along your spine. The length of the incision will depend on how many bones are being fused together. Your surgeon will then do the spine fusion with or without instrumentation. Once the bone graft is in place, your incision will be closed and the surgery will be complete.

Spinal cord monitoring

Spinal cord monitoring is a procedure that may be done by a nurse during your surgery. Electrodes are placed on your scalp and other parts of your body to make sure that the spinal nerves have good blood flow. If you have spinal cord monitoring, you may or may not notice some irritation to your scalp after the surgery. This irritation should resolve within a few days after the surgery.

In case of excess blood loss

All surgeries will cause some bleeding. The amount of blood loss you have will depend on the number of bones you are having fused and any additional surgical steps we might need to take in your case, such as osteotomies, anterior fusions, etc. Sometimes, it may be necessary to give you blood transfusions either during or after your surgery. We will talk with you about this before surgery. If you have objections to getting blood products, please let us know.

We will manage your pain before, during, and after surgery

Pain is a common and expected part of spine surgery; you should expect it. But know that we will help you manage your pain. Our goal is to do everything we can to help lower your pain, while managing the side effects of your pain medicine. We want you to be able to get up, move around, and function well enough that you are able to recover as quickly as possible.
A multimodal pain approach

The approach we will use to treat your pain is what we call a “multimodal” approach. This means we will treat your pain in multiple ways:

- We will give you different types of pain medicines.
- We will give you pain medicines at different times, including before, during, and after your surgery.

Pain management before surgery

In the pre-op, we may give you a few pills with a small sip of water to help stop some of your pain before it even starts. The types of pills and the amount of pills that we give you will depend on your personal history. Your history includes any other medical conditions you have, any medicines you regularly take, and your age. The exact medicines you get will be decided by your surgical and anesthesia teams before your surgery.

Pain management during surgery

While you sleep during surgery, the anesthesia team will give you more medicines through your IV. This medicine will help lower the overall pain you have after surgery, as well as the pain and nausea you have immediately after the procedure.

Pain management after surgery

After surgery, we will continue to give you more medicine for your pain. Like before, the specific medicines we give you will depend on your medical history and the medicines you already take. In general, the medicines you get will usually include a narcotic pain medicine, a medicine to lower inflammation and swelling, and a medicine to lower nerve pain.

In most cases, we will give you prescriptions for these medicines when you leave the hospital, and you will take these medicines for several weeks.

After surgery, you will go to the PACU or the Intensive Care Unit

Most of the time, patients are taken to the PACU right after surgery. But sometimes, after major reconstructions, patients will go to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for 1 or 2 days.

- You may go to the ICU after surgery if you had major reconstruction on your back.
- You may go to the ICU if the anesthesiologist decides that your breathing tube should be kept in place after your surgery.
After surgery, we will take you to the Recovery Room (PACU)

In PACU, we closely watch over you as you wake up after surgery. After you are awake, we will take you to your regular hospital room.

• When you wake up:
  – a nurse will help you breathe deeply and have you cough to clear your lungs
  – you will have an IV in your arm so we can give you medicine as needed
  – you may get oxygen to help you breathe.

• Most people stay in PACU for several hours after surgery. How long you are there depends on how your body reacts to the anesthesia.

• If the nurse feels you are up to it, you may be allowed to have visitors once you are awake and your pain is under control.

We may use a patient-controlled analgesia pump (PCA) to help your pain

Instead of an IV and oral medicines, we may use a pain pump to help your pain. Like an IV, a pain pump puts medicine through your skin and into your veins. Unlike a regular IV, a pain pump is something you control. Essentially, when you push a button on the pump, medicine goes into your body. The button on the pump is for your use only. The button should not be pushed by the nurse or your family. The pump is set up so you don’t give yourself too much medicine.

Other medicines you will need after surgery

In addition to pain medicine, you will get:

• antibiotics to help prevent infection
• blood thinners to prevent blood clots
• medicines to stop nausea, if you need them.

During your hospital stay you will also have a list of “as needed medicines” that will always be available to you. These medicines will be for symptoms such as muscle spasms, nausea, indigestion, pain, and itching. If you have any symptoms that are not being controlled, please talk with your nurse.

We will give you pain medicine after surgery

We will do everything we can to lessen your pain after surgery. But some pain is simply a part of recovery. Our goal is to make you as comfortable as possible while keeping the side effects of any pain medicine you get as low as possible.

To control your pain after surgery, we will give you:

• pain medicine through your IV
• pills, including pain pills, anti-inflammatory drugs, and muscle relaxants.
After the PACU, we will take you to a regular hospital room

Once you are ready, we will take you to your regular hospital room. You will still have your IV in so we can continue to give you medicines.

What to expect after surgery

**You may have facial and body swelling.**

It is common for patients to have facial and body swelling after surgery. This is caused by the position your body was in during surgery and IV fluids. All of this swelling usually goes away in 1 to 2 days. It is nothing to worry about. Rarely patients may also have a swollen tongue for the first few days after surgery.

**You may have a cardiac monitor.**

You may have a cardiac monitor attached to your body so we can watch your heart rate and rhythm.

**You may be wearing an oxygen mask.**

You may have an oxygen mask on to help ease your breathing.

**You will have TED hose or plastic wraps around your legs.**

You will be wearing elastic, thigh-high stockings (TED hose) or inflatable plastic wraps (sequential pumps) on your legs. Both the TED hose and sequential pumps are used to help prevent blood clots.

**You will have a Foley catheter.**

You will have a Foley catheter in your bladder. This is a tube that is placed into the bladder to drain urine from your body. The catheter will be put into your body after you are asleep in surgery. The Foley catheter will be removed once you are able to get out of bed fairly easily.

**You will have drains (Hemovacs) attached to your body.**

You will have one or more drains (called Hemovacs) near your back, front, or side incision(s). These drains collect excess blood and drainage from under the skin. This keeps your wounds from swelling and also helps the doctors estimate your blood loss.

**At first, you will get water and ice chips instead of regular food or drink.**

After surgery, you are likely to get sick if you eat regular food right away. Your body has to gradually work up to digesting a regular diet. At first, we will give you ice chips and sips of water. Next, we will give you a clear, liquid diet. Finally, when you are ready, you will go back to eating your regular diet.
**You will have breathing exercises to do.**

After your surgery, you will be expected to do breathing exercises to keep your lungs clear. You will do exercises using a device called an incentive spirometer. We will teach you how to use it. There is a little ball in the device that rises up with the force of your breath. Make it a personal contest to continue to increase the number reached by the ball. The higher the ball, the better your lungs are working. We will work with you and your family to remind you to use your incentive spirometer often while you are in the hospital.

**Getting out of bed**

On the first day after your surgery, we will help you get up and sit on the side of your bed. We will also help you get out of bed to either stand or sit in a chair. It is very important that you begin walking as soon as possible. Walking will help you recover faster.

**Numbness and tingling**

It is very common for patients to have numbness around their incisions after surgery. This is expected with any skin incision. The area of numbness gradually shrinks with time but may take up to 1 to 2 years to go away. Some patients also say that their feet, legs, or back “feel funny.” It is common to have tingling feelings and sensations that can’t be explained. If you have any of this, do not worry. These will mostly likely go away over time. It is still safe for you to move and walk.
Staying safe while you are in the hospital

**Prevent falls**

It is very important to stay safe and avoid falls while you are in the hospital. When you need to get up or go to the bathroom, always ask for help from your nurse or another staff member.

**Prevent blood clots**

In addition to your TED hose or the plastic sleeves around your legs, we will give you blood thinning medicines. This is so we can help prevent blood clots from forming. Every day while you are in the hospital, we will send a sample of your blood to the lab to make sure your blood is not too thin or too thick.

**Keep your lungs clear**

You will continue to do your breathing exercises and using your incentive spirometer. Exercising your lungs will help prevent pneumonia.

The length of your hospital stay

How long you will be in the hospital after surgery will depend on how well you are able to walk around and how much pain you have. Most patients leave after 2 nights in the hospital (though some patients are able to leave the hospital the day after surgery). But if you have any other medical issues that slow your recovery, you may need to stay longer. Your surgical team will decide exactly how long you need to stay.

Visitors

You are allowed to have visitors while you are in the hospital. Overnight visitors are permitted on a case by case basis. Please ask your nurse for details.

Getting you ready to leave

A case manager will probably visit you while you are in the hospital. They are members of your healthcare team. They can help you make plans for the things you will need to do after you leave the hospital. This may include arrangements for outpatient therapy and lab work, home health services, and other rehab programs or services. You can ask to speak with the case manager at any time during your hospital stay.

Make sure you have a ride home

You must have someone pick you up at the time you are released from the hospital. You will not be allowed to drive yourself home. And you will not be allowed to leave the hospital alone.

**Am I allowed to take a taxi or a bus home?**

No. You must have someone pick you up.
Caring for your incision

**Bandages**

Most patients leave with glue or steri-strips (small tape strips) on their incision(s).

- Check your incisions daily for any problems.
- Do not put any ointments or solutions over your incisions or steri-strips at any time.
- Let the steri-strips to fall off on their own. (The only exception is if they are still there 2 weeks after your surgery, then you may have someone may remove them at that time.)

**Showering and bathing after surgery**

- Do not get your incision wet for the first 4 days after your surgery. Cover your incision when you shower or take a sponge bath.
- On the 5th day after your surgery, it is safe to get your incision wet when you are in the shower. You no longer have to cover it.
- On the 5th day after your surgery, clean your incision using soap and water when you are in the shower. Then gently pat your incision dry with a towel.
- No tub baths for 4 weeks after surgery.

**Fighting infection**

- Always wash your hands before and after you touch your incision.
- Call us at 970-439-4470 if your incision:
  - gets redder
  - swells
  - feels warm or begins to hurt
  - begins to drain or smell bad
  - separates at the edges.
- Call us at 970-439-4470 if you have a temperature higher than 101.5°F (38.6°C)
- Do not get into a bathtub, pool, spa, river, or lake until 4 weeks after surgery.
Pain

Pain after surgery is normal. It is part of healing. With time, you should have less pain than you had before surgery.

Understand your prescription pain medicine

• When you left the hospital, we probably gave you a prescription for pain medicine. While you may need prescription pain medicine at first, it is best to start lowering how much you take as soon as you can.

• If you were taking narcotics preoperatively, do not take those with any new prescriptions you get from the surgeon.

• Please call at least 48 hours ahead of time for a refill. We can't give refills after 5pm or on weekends.

• You must pick up your prescription from our clinic. These prescriptions cannot be mailed, faxed, or called in. Please plan ahead.

Expect to take less pain medicine over time!

Prescription pain medicine is addictive; it is important that you do not become dependent on it. We expect you to use less prescription pain medicine over time.

• When you first leave the hospital, we will give you a prescription for pain medicine with specific instructions.

• We recommend you wean your narcotic use slowly and not abruptly. If you are taking 2 narcotic tablets every 4 hours as needed, then wean to 1 tablet every 4 hours, then 1 tablet every 5 hours, and so on until you are able to stop taking these narcotics all together. You may be given specific weaning instructions when you are discharged.

• Six weeks after surgery, you should not be taking any prescription pain medicine.

Important: Six weeks after your surgery, we will stop refilling prescriptions for pain medicine. If you think you still need prescription pain medicine after 6 weeks, we will refer you to your regular doctor. There are no exceptions.
Do not take too much acetaminophen

Very bad liver damage may occur if you take more than 4,000 mg of acetaminophen (Tylenol) in a 24-hour period. If you take acetaminophen (Tylenol), take it alone. Do not take it with any prescription pain medicine.

- Today more than 600 over-the-counter and prescription medicines have acetaminophen in them. Some patients exceed the recommended dose either by accidentally taking multiple acetaminophen-containing products without realizing it, or by not following dosing instructions.
- Narcotics such as Percocet, Vicodin, and Norco have acetaminophen in them—from 325 mg to 500 mg per tablet. It is very important that you know the dosage and that you do not combine it with other products containing acetaminophen.

If you were taking a prescription bone medicine before surgery

Your surgeon will tell you when it is OK for you to start taking these medicines again. Do not start taking any bone medicine—including Forteo, Fosamax, and Reclast—until you talk with your surgeon.

If you are constipated after surgery, follow these bowel medicine guidelines

When you are discharged from the hospital, we may give you a prescription (Senna-S) for a stool softener and laxative medicine. Follow these guidelines if you have problems going to the bathroom:

- If it has been 3 days since your last bowel movement, increase the Senna-S to 2 tablets twice a day. (This is the maximum dose allowed.)
- If you do not have a bowel movement for 5 days, take Miralax as directed in addition to the Senna-S.
- If you have not had a bowel movement for 6 days, take a suppository as directed on packaging.
- If you have not had a bowel movement for 7 days after surgery, use a Fleets enema. Follow the directions on the package. If you are still constipated, please call our office.
- If you become nauseated, have vomiting, your belly is swollen and hard, or you have very bad belly cramping at any time, contact our office immediately.

For 6 months after surgery, do not take any NSAIDs

Do not use any NSAIDs (Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines) such as Ibuprofen, Motrin, Advil, Aleve, Celebrex, etc. for at least 6 months after surgery. These medicines will actually slow the fusion healing process. Once you no longer need your prescription pain medicine, we recommend you take acetaminophen (Tylenol) when you have pain.
Protect your back as you recover

**Bending and Lifting**

During the first 6 weeks, avoid bending or lifting anything weighing more than 15 pounds. When you lift something, keep it close to your body so that your leg and arm muscles do the work. Remember to brace your abdominal muscles, stoop at the hips and knees keeping your back straight and the three curves of your spine balanced. This will help prevent pain and further injury to your spine.

**Walking**

Walking is excellent exercise. Walking helps your pulmonary, cardiovascular and digestive systems. It also prevents blood clots from forming and it increases muscle strength and endurance. Once you are home it is important to continue walking activities.

**Going to the bathroom**

Low toilet seats can make regular toileting very difficult and even unsafe for patients who have had back surgery. Depending on the type, location, and surrounding area of your toilet at home, you may be instructed in using a raised toilet seat or toilet rails.

**Walking, dressing, and bathing**

Members of the physical therapy and occupational therapy teams will work with you in the hospital so you will know how to safely walk, resume activities, bathe, dress, and take care of yourself as you recover.

**Adaptive equipment**

Patients sometimes need adaptive equipment (a wheeled walker, an elevated toilet seat) after surgery. Hospital beds are generally not required after discharge for most spinal procedures. You will be able to sleep in your regular bed as long as it is not too low to the ground or a water bed. An occupational and physical therapist will see you during your hospitalization and help you obtain any equipment you will need at home.

**Turning in bed**

To turn safely in bed, first tighten your stomach muscles. Bend your knees slightly toward your chest. Roll to one side, keeping your ears, shoulders and hips in line. Be careful not to bend or twist at the waist.
Getting out of bed

To safely get out of bed, first tighten your stomach muscles. Turn onto your side. Push your body up with one elbow and the other hand. At the same time, gently lower both legs to the floor. Keep your stomach muscles tight.

Getting up and sitting down

To protect your back, use your arms to lift up and get down. Keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in line. Brace your stomach muscles, bend at the hips keeping your back straight, and use your leg muscles to lower and raise yourself onto the front edge of the chair or couch.

Standing and turning

If you stand for a long time, change your position often by shifting your weight from one foot to the other. Don’t twist or turn from the waist. Instead, turn your entire body as a single unit.

Going up and down stairs

- Use handrails if you can, and climb just one step at a time. Remember to be careful and take your time.
- Your physical therapist will practice going up and down stairs with you while you are at the hospital.

Protect your back when you ride in a car

Driving

No driving for 6 weeks and for as long as you are on prescription pain medicine.

Riding as a passenger

You may ride in a car as a passenger whenever you feel you can tolerate this. Some tips:

- You should sit in the front passenger seat, with the seat slightly reclined.
- You should probably start with shorter drives. If you do take a longer trip, stop every hour and walk around.
- As you are recovering, you should only ride in cars that are mid-size or larger.
- Avoid all compact cars (2 doors), all sports cars, and cars with bucket seats. It is hard to sit down so low.
**Getting in and out of the car**

- To enter the car, walk up to the passenger door, turn, and then back up until you feel the car behind your legs. Reach back and place your left hand on the dashboard or car door and place your right hand on the back of the front seat. Bend your legs and gently sit down. Scoot your hips back and slowly turn your body as you put your legs inside the car.

- To exit the car, gently turn your body toward the door while placing your legs outside the car. Scoot forward until your feet are on the ground. Then push up to a standing position by placing your arms on the dashboard or car door and back of the seat.

- A plastic trash bag or satin pillowcase on the car seat is helpful for sliding and turning.

**Stop and take breaks if you are in the car for a long period of time**

When you are in a car, we recommend that you stop every hour to get out and walk. This is especially important when you leave the hospital if your home is far away. Walking and moving will help keep blood clots from forming.
More tips for staying safe as you recover

Be sure to explain to your entire family what you must do to be safe.

- Always keep a cell phone or cordless phone with you in case you are alone and need help.
- Use a walker basket or shopping bag so you can carry items with you when you use your walker.
- Keep a night light on in hallways and in the bathroom.
- Allow yourself extra time when you get up from sitting or lying down. It will help keep you from getting dizzy.
- Don’t walk outside in icy or snowy conditions.

Sexual activity

You can have sex as soon as you feel comfortable doing so. The safest position is for you to lie flat on your back in bed.

Returning to work

Most patients are able to go back to desk work by 6 weeks after their surgery. All of this depends on your progress and the type of surgery you had. We recommend that when you do go back, you go back to half days for the first couple of weeks.

Preventing setbacks

As you recover, be careful and increase your activity slowly. If you have increased pain for more than two hours after an activity, it usually means you’ve done too much too soon. Don’t just reach for the pain pills. Take pain as a warning sign to slow down and pay attention to your posture and movements. Make sure you’re bracing your belly muscles and keeping your ears, shoulders and hips in line.

Staying safe if you have pets

If you have pets, you will probably need help taking care of them after surgery. You will not be able to lift heavy bags of pet food or bend down to the floor to fill their dishes. You will not be able to walk your dog using a leash if it is a large dog that pulls. Also, it is very easy to trip over pets, and you will need to be careful since pets may jump. Please make arrangements for assistance with pet care after your surgery.
Six Weeks After Surgery: What to Expect

Keep your 6-week follow-up appointment

Six weeks after your surgery, you will need to come to our office for a follow-up appointment. If no appointment has been scheduled for you within a few days after your surgery, please call us at 970-439-4470 to set up an appointment.

Remember that you are still healing

Even though you are 6 weeks out from surgery you are still not fully healed. The bone takes 4 to 8 months to fully fuse and heal. Until that time, you may still have some aches and pains in your back. All of this is normal during the healing process.

Around 4 to 8 months after the fusion, you may notice a sudden decrease in your pain. That is the day that the bones all fused together and became solid. Patients have often described it as a light switch going off. You can hasten this healing period by doing several things:

- During the first few weeks, get up and walk 3 to 4 times a day. Increase the amount of time you walk each week. Getting up and moving will help feed the growing bone with oxygenated blood.

- Avoid extremes motions in your back, since the less you stress it, the faster it heals.

- Don’t take ibuprofen, Aleve, or any other anti-inflammatories, as they all slow down bone healing. You may take acetaminophen products for pain.

- don’t smoke or use any tobacco products.

If you had arm weakness before surgery

If you had weakness in your arms before the surgery, you can start doing weight lifting 6 weeks after your surgery.

If you had numbness before your surgery

If you had numbness for more than 3 weeks before your surgery, it is possible that you still have not noticed an improvement.

- It often takes weeks to months for numbness to get better, especially if you had constant numbness for a long time before surgery.

- Until the 1-year mark, we won’t be able to tell if the numbness is permanent.
Commonly Asked Questions

How long should I avoid driving?
You should not drive while taking narcotics. You should avoid driving during the busy traffic times and remember to carefully position your mirrors before starting to drive. Some states do not allow collars when driving. You should wear your collar when driving, so if your states does not allow you to drive with a collar, then do not drive for the first 6 weeks post-op.

When is it safe for me to have sex again?
You can have sex as soon as you feel comfortable doing so. The safest position is for you to lie flat in bed.

When can I lift weights?
Avoid all overhead lifting. You can lift light weights that are 15 pounds are less. Hold the weights close to your body when you lift. And keep the neck in a neutral position while lifting.

Will the instruments used in my fusion cause alarms in airports to go off?
No. The materials used in your fusion are made of titanium. You will not trigger any alarms or metal detectors.