Thoracotomy (Lung Surgery): Recovering at home

Your surgery and recovery

Thoracotomy is surgery that treats a problem with the lungs. This surgery is used to:

• Diagnose or treat lung cancer or other lung diseases
• Repair lung injuries
• Remove infection, blood, blood clots, or fluid from the lungs or chest cavity

Recovery after thoracotomy surgery can take 6 to 8 weeks. During this time, you’ll have follow-up appointments so your doctor can check your progress. The information in this fact sheet explains how to take care of yourself and speed your recovery at home.

Taking care of your wound

Your incision will take several weeks to heal. It’s normal to have some bruising, itchiness, or soreness for several weeks, but these should gradually get better day by day. Please follow these directions while your incision heals:

• Important — check the incision every day. Call your surgeon to report signs of infection. These include redness, drainage, or tenderness that gets worse rather than better. Warmth or an odor from the incision are also signs of infection.

• To prevent infection, clean the incision every day. You may shower 48 hours after surgery, but stand so that the water does not directly hit the incision. Use soap and water to wash the site and pat it dry with a clean towel.

• Do not take a bath. Soaking exposes your incision to more bacteria.

• Do not use lotion, powder, cream, ointment, or any other product on the incision, unless your doctor tells you to.

• Do not touch or handle the incision any more than necessary. If you do need to touch the incision, wash your hands first.

• Follow your doctor’s instructions about staples or steri-strips used to close the incision.
Taking care of your lungs

Coughing and deep breathing are important to prevent infection in your lungs. Continue to do the breathing exercises you were taught in the hospital. If you were given a spirometer to take home, use it several times a day.

Constipation

Constipation is common after surgery. Try these tips to prevent or manage it:

- Include fruit, fiber, and bran in your diet.
- Drink plenty of liquids.
- Consider using a stool softener for as long as you’re taking your pain medication. Pain medication can cause constipation.
- If you do become constipated, use a mild laxative. You can also try a small enema.

If these measures do not work, call your primary care doctor.

Diet

A balanced diet will help you feel better and heal faster. During your recovery and after, aim to eat a well-balanced diet that focuses on:

- Protein to help tissues heal
- Fresh fruit and vegetables for vitamins and other important nutrients
- Fluids and fiber to help your bowels move

If your healthcare providers have given you a special diet to use, be sure to follow their directions.

General activity

While you are recovering, rest whenever you begin to feel tired. Resume activities slowly, doing a bit more each day.

- Avoid activities that put stress on your incision, such as yardwork or lifting anything over 10 pounds.
- Gradually increase your physical activity. Walking is a good way to exercise. Start out slowly. As you can, add a little more walking time.
- Do not drive until your doctor approves it. Before you begin driving again, be sure you’re physically strong enough, your judgment is clear, and you know how your pain medication affects you.
- To find out when you can return to work, speak with your doctor.

Medication

Follow your doctor’s directions for taking any prescribed medication. With pain medication, don’t wait until the pain gets bad before you take it — follow your doctor’s schedule and dose.

Oxygen

You might also have oxygen at home during your recovery period. Follow the instructions given by the oxygen provider, and make sure you ask questions if there’s anything you don’t understand about using the oxygen.
Range of motion exercises

Range of motion exercises help you regain flexibility and strength in your arms and shoulders. These exercises are easy to do, and you probably learned them in the hospital from a healthcare provider. It’s important to keep doing these exercises 3 or 4 times a day while you recover from the surgery.

Hand against back
- Start with your arm down to your side, palm facing back.
- Bend your arm and place the back of your hand against your back. Reaching high up on your back is not as important as just getting the hand behind you.

Arm up and out
At first try this lying down, using the bed for support. As you get stronger, sit or stand for this exercise.
- Bring your arm out to the side, with your palm facing down.
- Keep the arm straight and slowly raise it until it is level with your shoulder.

Hand on head
- Bring your hand and arm forward to the center of your body.
- Slowly raise your arm until the palm of your hand can be placed on the top of your head. Keep your neck straight — don’t bend it forward to meet your hand.

Hand to opposite shoulder
This exercise is part of the position you will need to support coughing.
- With your palm facing your body, reach across your body.
- Grasp your shoulder on the opposite side.
When should I get medical help?

Call your doctor if you have any of these symptoms while recovering from your thoracotomy:

- Unexplained fever of 101° F or higher
- Redness, unusual drainage, warmth, odor, or increasing pain at the incision site
- Constipation that doesn’t get better after you take the steps described on page 2

Call 911 if you have any of these symptoms while recovering from your thoracotomy:

- Sudden difficulty in breathing
- Separation of the incision — the sides of the wound pulling further apart than they were when you left the hospital