



## SPINE

# | Patient Journey Guide

**WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY PHYSICIANS  
BARNES-JEWISH HOSPITAL  
BARNES-JEWISH WEST COUNTY HOSPITAL**

Thank you for choosing us for your spine surgery. The physicians and staff at Washington University, Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital will serve as your care team. Our highly specialized team will work with you to provide excellent care. We are committed to making a correct diagnosis and developing your treatment plan to ensure that you receive the highest quality and safest care possible.

You have talked with your doctor and decided to have spine surgery. During your hospital stay, we will help you recover from your surgery in a healthy way. By reading this guide, you are already on a journey back to enjoying your favorite activities.

Since 1992, *U.S. News & World Report* has placed Barnes-Jewish Hospital and its partners, Washington University Physicians, on the elite Honor Roll of America's Best Hospitals. Experience the best — you deserve it!

### **YOUR JOURNEY TO RECOVERY STARTS NOW.**



**This is your journey guide for a successful surgery. You will have an excellent care team to lead you along the way.**

- Use this guide to learn about what will happen before, during and after surgery.
- Complete the guide checklists. This will help you prepare for a healthy recovery.
- Bring this guide with you to all doctor visits, meetings and your hospital stay.



\_\_\_\_\_  
**PATIENT**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**DOCTOR**

**My Diagnosis:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**My Surgery:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**My surgery is scheduled on:** \_\_\_\_\_ **and will take about** \_\_\_\_\_ **hours.**

**My surgery will take place at:**

**Barnes-Jewish Hospital**  
1 Barnes-Jewish Hospital Plaza Drive  
St. Louis, MO 63110

**Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital**  
12634 Olive Boulevard  
Creve Coeur, MO 63141

**Additional Items:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**My follow-up appointment:** \_\_\_\_\_

**If you have any questions at any point in your journey, contact:**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone Number:** \_\_\_\_\_



## YOUR JOURNEY TIMELINE

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## GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CARE TEAM

*Your care team is here to provide world-class health care that is compassionate and respectful. We are committed to helping you during your entire journey.*

<p><b>Spine Doctor and Surgical Care Team</b></p> <p>Your doctor and surgical care team will perform your surgery and guide your care during your hospital stay. After surgery, you will see them in the office for follow-up care.</p>	<p><b>Registered Nurse (RN)</b></p> <p>Your nurses are trained in spine care and will follow your doctor's plan for your rapid recovery. They will teach you how to stay safe and healthy during every step of your recovery.</p>
<p><b>Anesthesia Team</b></p> <p>An anesthesia doctor, certified nurse anesthetist, or nurse practitioner will evaluate your surgery needs. This team is specially trained to keep you safe during surgery and in recovery. They will also help you manage your pain. You will meet a member of this team at your surgical evaluation at the Center for Preoperative Assessment and Planning (CPAP).</p>	<p><b>Physical Therapist (PT)</b></p> <p>Your physical therapy team will work with you to increase your strength after surgery. This team has special training to help you return to a healthy and active lifestyle.</p>
<p><b>Nurse Practitioner (NP)</b></p> <p>Your nurse practitioner will work with your spine doctor to manage your care. They will see you after your surgery and be your main contact during your hospital stay.</p>	<p><b>Occupational Therapist (OT)</b></p> <p>Your occupational therapy team will teach you how to be independent at home. They will help you learn how to safely complete daily activities, like dressing and bathing.</p>
<p><b>Case Manager</b></p> <p>Your case manager is trained as a registered nurse or social worker. Your case manager will work with your care team to best meet your needs for going home or to a rehab facility. They will also help you with insurance questions and home equipment.</p>	<p><b>Concierge-available at Barnes-Jewish Hospital</b></p> <p>The concierge helps to ensure that you and your loved ones' have an excellent experience during your hospital stay. They will visit during your stay and explain the available hospital services, which include computer use, notaries, local restaurants/attractions, transportation and navigating the medical campus. If needed, they will help find lodging for your loved ones' during or after your stay.</p>



## GETTING HEALTHY FOR SURGERY

Take steps to feel good about your health – starting now! This checklist will help you to be healthy before, during and after surgery.

### Choose a “coach” for your care journey

Your coach will play an important role in your recovery. Select a spouse, family member or friend who can be by your side during your entire care journey.

Please choose your coach based on the following:

- Your coach must:
  - Be in good physical condition.
  - Come to your office visits, especially the visit right before your surgery.
  - **Stay with you 24 hours a day after you are discharged from the hospital for up to 1-4 weeks**, depending on your surgery.
  - Provide transportation to and from surgery and doctor visits.
  - Communicate clearly with your doctor’s team as needed.
- Your coach will assist you with:
  - Medication and pain management.
  - Personal care such as bathing and using the bathroom.
  - Household chores, meal prep, etc.
  - Position changes, including getting in and out of bed.
  - Following all instructions from your doctor’s office including exercises and restrictions.
- Your coach will:
  - Motivate you to be your best during your journey.
  - Help you stay on track and reach your recovery goals.
  - Be a second set of ears to learn with you.
  - Help you become independent faster.
  - Learn the proper exercises from PT/OT and encourage these exercises. These exercises will be taught during your hospitalization.

### Other doctors involved in your care

See all doctors involved in your care and tell them about your spine surgery. Your spine doctor may require that you get medical clearance for surgery. They may also need you to see other doctors such as a heart or lung doctor. Please tell your spine doctor if you are being treated by any other doctors.

### Activity

It is important that you stay active before your surgery. Walking, swimming and deep breathing exercises are key for a faster recovery.

### Teeth

Schedule an appointment with your dentist before surgery to make sure your teeth are in their best health. Healthy teeth will help lower the chance of infection after surgery. Let your spine doctor know if you have any dental problems or concerns.

### Nutrition

It is important to eat well-balanced meals during your journey. Seeing a registered dietician will help you reach and maintain your goals faster. *For more information, call Move by BJC at 314.286.0525 or Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital’s Diabetes and Nutrition Counseling Services at 314.996.3823.*

### Diabetes

It is important to control your blood sugars during your journey. This will help you heal faster and prevent wound problems and infection. *For more information, please contact the BJC physician referral service at 314.867.3627 to be connected to one of our locations.*

- Washington University diabetes center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital
- Diabetes education and nutrition counseling services at Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital

### Stop smoking, vaping and the use of nicotine products

Nicotine products include cigarettes, patches, nicotine gum, tobacco, e-cigarettes and vaping products. It is recommended that you stop tobacco products. Your body will recover faster and prevent infection. For tips on how to change habits, reduce stress, and prevent relapses, visit [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov) or call toll-free 1.800.QUIT.NOW (1.800.784.8669). You can also talk with your doctor or nurse if you are finding it hard to quit. They will be able to help you with resources.

### Returning to work

Ask your spine doctor’s office when you are likely to return to work. Your care team will help you prepare to go back to work safely and return to your active lifestyle.

The office can provide short term disability for up to 3 months following your spine surgery. Please fax needed documents to the office directly and allow 14 business days for completion.

**Being prepared will improve your journey from surgery to recovery.**



## GETTING READY FOR SURGERY

*The surgical evaluation visit is an important part of your journey.*

### SURGICAL EVALUATION VISIT AT THE CENTER FOR PREOPERATIVE ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING (CPAP)

- You and your coach will meet with the anesthesia team at your CPAP visit.**
- We will schedule your visit for 1-4 weeks before surgery.**

### WHAT TO BRING

- This Patient Journey Guide**
- Insurance card and driver's license or state ID**
- Advanced Directive (if you have one)**
- Complete list of your health history and past surgeries**
- Complete list of your current medicines including prescriptions, over-the-counter, vitamins and herbal supplements**
- Copy of your pacemaker card including make, model and settings (if you have one)**

### WHAT TO EXPECT

#### **Health Review**

- We will talk about your health history and past surgeries.
- Please tell us if you have ever had a problem with anesthesia.
- You will receive a health exam that may include blood tests, EKG and other tests as determined by anesthesia and/or surgeon.

#### **Medicines**

- We will talk about your current medicines.
- You will be given instructions about which medicines to take and which ones to stop before surgery. **It is important that you follow these instructions.**
- You will be given surgical soap to shower with before surgery.

### MAPS AND PATIENT INFORMATION

Barnes-Jewish Hospital South: [BarnesJewish.org/directions](https://www.barnesjewish.org/directions)  
Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital: [BarnesJewishWestCounty.org/directions](https://www.barnesjewishwestcounty.org/directions)





## SET UP YOUR HOME CHECKLIST

<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Make meals ahead of time that can be reheated.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Put items that you use often in places that can be easily reached.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Delay your mail or have someone take care of your mail.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Do your laundry ahead of time and ensure clean sheets and blankets are on the bed.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Have someone to take care of your children and pets.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Set up someone to help you with household chores such as yard work, laundry and housecleaning.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Make sure all stairs at your home have sturdy railings.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Make clear pathways. Remove anything in the way of your walking. This includes loose rugs, uneven surfaces, wires and cords. These items could cause you to slip or trip.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Make sure all walking areas are well lit. If needed, add extra light to see.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Have a chair with armrests to help you get up from a sitting position. Make sure the chair is sturdy and not too low.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Make sure your bed is not too low, and do not use a waterbed.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Check your bathroom – consider a shower chair, raised toilet seat and hand-held shower head.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Plan to be independent after surgery. Borrow or buy items to help you. To review equipment go to page 17.</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be sure to have a plan of care in place with your caregiver for after surgery as admission to a skilled nursing facility is not always appropriate or guaranteed for patients with spine surgery.</b>



### SPECIAL ALERT

**It may be time for you to stop taking certain medicines before surgery. Please review your instructions.**

## 2 WEEKS BEFORE SURGERY

- What medicines do you stop taking?**
  - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs) and arthritis medications such as: Advil®, Aleve®, ibuprofen, Motrin®, Indocin®, Naprosyn®, Celebrex®, Meloxicam®.
  - Please check with your nurse about the exact time frame for stopping aspirin products and blood thinners such as: Coumadin®, Xarelto®, Plavix®.
- Do you have an infection?**
  - Call your spine doctor's office if you feel sick or think you have an infection of any kind.
  - Signs of infection are:
    - Chills and sweats.
    - A change in cough or new cough.
    - Sore throat or new mouth sore.
    - Redness, soreness or swelling in any area including teeth.
    - New onset of pain.
    - Any changes in skin, urination or mental status.
- Do you have any open wounds?**
  - Call your spine doctor's office if you have any open wounds, sores, rashes or acne.
- Complete the "set up your home" checklist on page 8.**

## 1 WEEK BEFORE SURGERY

- Pick up your nasal ointment prescription from your pharmacy.**
- Call your spine doctor's office if you have any open wounds or think you have an infection.**

## 5 DAYS BEFORE SURGERY

- Start the surgical soap showers. The last shower will be on the day of surgery.**
- Start the nasal ointment and apply 2 times a day. The last treatment will be the night before surgery.**

## 2-3 DAYS BEFORE SURGERY

- Continue the surgical soap showers and using the nasal ointment.**
- Call your spine doctor's office if you have any open wounds or think you have an infection.**
- If you have a walker, pack it in your car to bring to the hospital. Your therapist will check this equipment and see what else you may need at home.**
- Follow any special instructions from your spine doctor's office or CPAP visit.**
- If you are not sure if you were given any special instructions, call your spine doctor's office.**
- Pack your bags.**
- Complete the "what to bring" checklist on page 11.**



## THE DAY BEFORE SURGERY

- A central line IV may be placed, if your spine doctor feels it is needed.**
  - The nurse will schedule this.
  - Please note: If your surgery is on a Monday, it may be placed on the Friday before surgery.
- Follow the instruction sheet given to you at your Center for Preoperative Assessment and Planning (CPAP) visit.**
- Nothing to eat or drink after midnight, including chewing gum, lozenges or water.**
- Remove all nail polish and artificial nails.**
- Take a surgical soap shower and sleep in clean sheets and pajamas.**
- Do not use any lotions, powders, perfumes or makeup.**
- Use your last nasal ointment treatment.**
- Complete the “What to bring” checklist on page 11.**

**Your spine care team is here to help whenever you have a question.  
Important phone numbers are included in this guide.**

## WHAT TO BRING TO THE HOSPITAL

<input type="checkbox"/> An attitude of success!
<input type="checkbox"/> This Patient Journey Guide
<input type="checkbox"/> List of your health history and current medicines
<input type="checkbox"/> Your insurance card
<input type="checkbox"/> Your photo ID
<input type="checkbox"/> A prescription card (if you have one)
<input type="checkbox"/> Hearing aids (if you have them)
<input type="checkbox"/> A credit card to pay for discharge medicines and co-pays (leave with your coach)
<input type="checkbox"/> Loose-fitting clothes for discharge, such as t-shirts and drawstring or elastic-band pants
<input type="checkbox"/> Comfortable non-skid shoes and socks (no flip-flops, sandals or Crocs)
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal toiletry items
<input type="checkbox"/> If you sleep with a breathing machine for obstructive sleep apnea, you must bring it with you
<input type="checkbox"/> Phone numbers of people you may want to call during your stay
<input type="checkbox"/> A spine kit if already purchased
<input type="checkbox"/> Bring eyeglass and contacts cases with you, do not wear contacts the morning of surgery

## WHAT NOT TO BRING TO THE HOSPITAL

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jewelry</li><li>• Valuables: such as a purse, wallet, checks and large amounts of money</li><li>• Mobile phone: it is best that you leave your phone at home or give to your coach</li><li>• Medicines from home: your care team will give you all medicines you will need during your stay</li></ul>
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## THE DAY OF SURGERY

Please follow and check off each box when complete. Completing this checklist to the best of your ability is your contribution to ensuring a safe and successful surgery.

### Before you arrive

- Take a surgical soap shower in the morning.
- Do not use any nail polish, lotions, deodorant, makeup, perfume or body sprays.
- Take any medicines that you were instructed to take the morning of your surgery with a small sip of water.
- Clear liquids (no food) are acceptable until 2 hours before hospital arrival time.
- Follow any special instructions given to you for the morning of surgery.

### Before going into surgery

- We will review your medicines and health history with you.
- We will start an IV in your arm.
- A member of your anesthesia team will talk about your anesthetic and the plan to control your pain after surgery.
- A member of your surgical care team will meet with you to review the surgical plan. They will mark on your body where the surgery will occur.
- Give your coach any last minute items, such as glasses, dentures or hearing aids, for safekeeping.
- You will be given medicine for comfort before going to the operating room.

### During your surgery

- Throughout your surgery, your surgical care team will take excellent care of you. They will monitor your breathing, heart rate and blood pressure.
- You may receive antibiotics. The first dose is given within 1 or 2 hours before the surgical incision to decrease the chance of getting a surgical site infection.
- A catheter to drain urine from your bladder may be placed.
- Updates about your progress will be given to your coach.

### Right after surgery

- You will wake up in the recovery room after surgery.
- Some patients may wake up in the intensive care unit instead.
- Highly trained nurses and an anesthesia team will monitor you. They will keep you safe and comfortable.





## YOUR HOSPITAL STAY

*Have your coach at your side to learn how to help you at home. The best time to visit is between 11 a.m.-8:30 p.m. Talk with your hospital care team about the best hours to visit.*

### What to expect:

- When you arrive to the hospital floor, a member of your care team will stop by to meet you and answer any of your questions.
- You will be able to call your care team at all times by pushing one button on your hand-held call light. Your nurse will show you how this works.
- Your blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, oxygen levels, IV fluids and healing progress will be checked often.
- You will have a dressing covering the incision where you had surgery. You may have a drain coming out of your incision that will be connected to a container. This will help with swelling and lower the risk of infection.
- Your catheter, used to drain urine from your bladder, will be checked often.
- Swelling is common. You may have elastic stockings and/or leg pumps to help blood flow.
- A member of your hospital care team will help you get out of bed.
- Your safety is our biggest concern. If you are alone and want to get up, please contact us with the call light. **Do not attempt to get up alone.**
- Your surgical care team and nurse practitioner will visit you often to monitor your overall health and recovery.



## IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU ARE ACTIVE IN YOUR OWN CARE

### Pain management

It is normal to have pain after surgery. We will work with you to help manage your pain. We will ask you to rate the pain you feel after surgery on a scale of 0 to 10 (see chart below). Your care team will assess how to best help you feel comfortable and tailor your medicines to meet your needs to give you a safe, rapid recovery. It is important to let us know when you first start feeling uncomfortable. Telling us right away will help us keep the uncomfortable feeling from getting worse. Please contact us with the call light any time you need help.

### Pain Scale

	<b>0</b> No Pain	<i>Does not interfere with ADLs*</i>
	<b>1</b>	
	<b>2</b> Mild Pain	<i>Mildly interferes with ADLs*</i>
	<b>3</b>	
	<b>4</b> Moderate Pain	<i>Somewhat interferes with ADLs*</i>
	<b>5</b>	
	<b>6</b> Severe Pain	<i>Partially interferes with ADLs*</i>
	<b>7</b>	
	<b>8</b> Very Severe Pain	<i>Greatly interferes with ADLs*</i>
	<b>9</b>	
	<b>10</b> Worst Possible Pain	<i>Completely interferes with ADLs*</i>

\* Activities of Daily Living (ADL) such as: sleeping, eating, mood, walking, enjoyment of life relationships

### Patient-Controlled Analgesia Information

Your spine doctor may order a Patient-Controlled Analgesia (PCA). This special pump will give you your pain medicine.

- The pump will be at your bedside.
- The medicine is controlled by the push of a button.
- The button is only for your use. It is not to be pushed by the nurse, your coach or loved-ones.
- The medicine goes into your IV line. It has settings that prevent you from getting too much medicine.

### Preventing blood clots

- Your care team will decide what treatments will be used to help prevent blood clots. This may include elastic stockings, leg pumps or medicines.
- Your care team will encourage out of bed activities. While in bed, move your legs, feet and ankles to keep your blood flowing. These activities will help prevent blood clots from forming in your legs.

### Preventing pneumonia

- You will receive a medical device called an incentive spirometer (IS). This device will help keep your lungs healthy by encouraging air movement and airflow. Your nurse will show you how to use it. Your IS should be used 10 times every hour while you are awake. You will be given an IS so you can continue using it at home.
- It is important to be out of bed and moving. Movement helps you take deeper breaths and creates better airflow to your lungs.



### Your nutritional needs

- Your stomach may be upset due to anesthesia or pain medicine. Your nurse will help you decide how quickly you can start eating and drinking.
- It may be a few days before you have a bowel movement. Anesthesia, pain medicines and less activity can slow the digestive system and cause constipation. Your doctor will order a stool softener and/or laxative.
- Once you are able, drink plenty of fluids (water is always best) and eat whole grains, fruits and vegetables.
- Cervical patients may find it hard to swallow for the first few days or weeks. This is normal and will go away. Soft foods are easier to swallow. Avoid dry foods. Please let your care team know if you cannot swallow your pills or have a hard time swallowing liquids.

### Healing by movement

- Your care team will help you start moving after surgery. This helps your breathing (airflow), circulation (blood flow) and digestion.
- Right after surgery, it may hurt to move. Movement will help decrease your pain, help you heal faster and reduce the risk of problems. **It is proven that when you move as soon as possible after surgery, your recovery will be better.**
- Your care team will help you sit up and/or get out of bed. This occurs soon after your surgery.
- Please use your call light any time you need help. Your safety is our biggest concern.

### Physical and Occupational Therapy

- After surgery, you may meet with a physical and/or occupational therapist. They will teach you how to get in and out of bed, walk, climb stairs and how to do certain exercises safely. Additionally, they will work with you on your activities of daily living.
- When you leave the hospital, you should be able to SAFELY do the following:
  - Follow spine precautions given to you by your care team.
  - Get dressed.
  - Get in and out of bed.
  - Get in and out of a chair.
  - Get in and out of a car.
  - Do all exercises provided by your physical and/or occupational therapist to increase strength.
  - Have balance and be mobile.
  - Climb up and down stairs.

The use of a walker or other equipment may be needed. You may also need help from your coach with some activities.



### Planning your discharge

It is important to us that your journey is successful. Our goal is to get you back to your active lifestyle safely. As you recover, your care team will discuss when it is safe for you to leave the hospital.

Together your care team will talk about:

- Your progress.
- Your strength and endurance.
- Your support resources.
- Your needs after discharge.

Your care team will work with you to determine your needs at home for a safe recovery. They may suggest an inpatient rehabilitation center or skilled nursing facility. Your care team may also suggest equipment such as a spine kit, walker, brace or other items to help you move safely. Consider visiting care facilities in advance of your procedure in the event you are not discharged home after surgery. Prior to discharge, create a plan with your coach or loved-one to leave the hospital.

If you are going to a skilled nursing facility, your social worker will arrange your transfer and discuss transportation to the skilled nursing facility. Be sure to have a plan of care in place with your caregiver for after surgery as admission to a skilled nursing facility is not always appropriate or guaranteed for patients with spine surgery.

### At discharge

- Your nurse will give you discharge instructions from your spine doctor. They will review them with you and your coach. **If you do not understand any of the instructions, please ask questions so you are sure about what to do when you get home.**
- Your nurse will also give you discharge prescriptions. You can get these filled at your regular pharmacy. The hospital has a mobile pharmacy for inpatients. The mobile pharmacy can bring the prescription medicines to your hospital room before you leave. You will need to pay for these with a credit card.
- Physical or occupational therapy will give you copies of your home exercises.
- You will be taken in a wheelchair to the patient pick-up area. Your coach or loved-one may pick you up there.
- If you are going to a rehabilitation center, your social worker or case coordinator will arrange your transportation.





## SAFETY ITEMS AND EQUIPMENT

The following is a checklist of safety items and equipment you may need to be independent at home.

You may want to call your insurance company about getting coverage for the following items before buying or renting.

**Spine kit: needed for most fusions, thoracic and lumbar patients (cervical patients may not need this)**

- You may buy a spine kit at your spine doctor's office or any medical supply store. If your surgery is at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, you can buy a kit while you are in the hospital. You will need to pay for the kit with a credit or debit card.
- The spine kit includes a sock aide, dressing stick, 32 inch reacher, elastic shoelaces (2 pairs), long-handled sponge, long-handled shoehorn and a toilet tong.

**Wheeled Walker: PT/OT will evaluate your need**

- If you do not have a walker, do not buy one on your own. During your stay, your care team will help you get equipment fitted just for you.
- If you own this equipment, bring it with you to the hospital. PT/OT will check it and make sure it is right for you.

**Other Equipment: If you have spine precautions after surgery, you may need the following:**

• **Elevated Toilet Seat**

- Raised toilet seat with handrails and locking clips. Make sure it fits your style of toilet.

**OR**

- Commode/bedside commode.

• **Shower/Bench chair**

- Fits in your tub/shower.

• **Brace equipment**

- This will depend on the type of surgery. Not all surgeries require a brace.
- Your spine doctor's office will provide the brace. It will be given to you during your spine doctor's visit or while you are in the hospital. You will be given instructions on its use.



## YOUR JOURNEY HOME

### Call 911 immediately if you have:

- Chest pain, pressure or sharp pain with deep breaths.
- Shortness of breath.
- Rapid heart rate greater than 150 beats per minute.
- Sudden onset or long lasting, severe headache.
- Fainting spells.
- Blood that appears when vomiting, coughing or with a bowel movement.

### Never drive yourself to the emergency room.

### Call your spine doctor right away for the following:

- Temperature above 101° F (38.5°C).
- Increased swelling in your legs or feet that won't go away.
- Increased pain that is not well controlled by your pain medicine.
- Your incision is red or warm.
- An opening in your incision.
- New or increased drainage from your incision.
- Drainage from your incision that has an odor.
- Increased numbness or tingling in your arms or legs.
- Pain, tenderness, warmth or swelling in either calf.
- New nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.
- Increased worry, anxiety or concerns about any issue.
- Any problem that was treated by another doctor or in an emergency room.



## OUR GOAL IS FOR YOU TO BE SUCCESSFUL AND READY TO RETURN TO THE ACTIVE LIFESTYLE YOU HAVE BEEN HOPING FOR

### Movement and activity

Expect to feel weak and tired when you first get home. You should feel a little stronger each day.

- Keep moving as much as you can without increasing your pain.
- Continue to follow spine precautions given to you by your care team.
- Do not lift anything over 10 pounds (like a gallon of milk) until your spine doctor clears you.
- Walking is the best exercise. It is best to do shorter, more frequent walks. Take 6-8 walks a day that are at least 5 minutes.
- Walking is the only exercise that you can do until cleared by your spine doctor. Use your walker until your spine doctor or therapist tells you that you no longer need it.
- Wear comfortable, non-skid shoes. Do not wear backless or toeless shoes. No flip-flops, sandals or Crocs.
- Increased pain for more than 2 hours after an activity often means you have done too much, too soon. Pain is a warning sign to slow down and pay attention to your posture and movements.
- Do not sit for long periods of time (more than 1 hour at a time). Prevent stiffness by getting up, walking around and changing positions often. If you are traveling distances, get out of the car every 2 hours and walk.
- Do not sit in low chairs that can make it hard to get up.
- Stand up slowly to prevent feeling faint or dizzy.
- You should not participate in a formal physical therapy program until cleared by your spine doctor.
- Pool exercise is encouraged after 6 weeks. You may walk in the pool or do gentle breaststrokes. No lakes, rivers or oceans until 3 months after surgery.
- You may stop wearing your support stockings when you get home, unless you are having swelling in your legs. If swelling continues, call your spine doctor.
- Keep a diary to record your journey. This includes your activities, pain medicines, bowel movements, etc.
- If you have any questions about your recovery, please contact your spine doctor's office. Your care team is here to help any time you have a question.

### Caring for your incision

- It is important to have someone check your incision twice a day. Call your spine doctor's office if you have any redness, warmth, odor, increased drainage or opening of the incision.
- You may have a bandage or dressing covering your incision. Change this bandage as instructed by your care team.
- Always wash your hands right before and right after you touch your dressing. Hand washing helps prevent infection and keeps you healthy.
- Your incision may have stitches, glue or Steri-Strips (small tape strips). If you have Steri-Strips, allow them to fall off on their own. If they have not fallen off after two weeks, you may remove them.
- Do not apply any creams or lotions to your incision.
- Do not soak in a bath, hot tub or pool until your spine doctor has cleared you.

## Pain and medicines

Your care team will give you a plan to manage your pain when you go home.

- Start by taking your pain medicine as prescribed. As your pain lessens, take less pain medicine.
- If you were given pain medicine at discharge, use this medicine for your pain. Do not take any pain medicine you may have at home.
- Do not suddenly stop taking your pain medication. Call your doctor's office before you run out.
- Try other ways to manage your pain:
  - **Activity:** movement and activity helps lessen pain.
  - **Distraction:** focus on something other than your pain.
  - **Relaxation:** find a quiet space, close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing.

## Constipation (trouble with bowel movements)

Pain medicine, along with decreased activity, can slow down normal bowel movements. Constipation is common. Your spine doctor will prescribe a stool softener and/or a laxative for you.

Some patients may also lose their desire for food after surgery.

- Try to eat small and frequent healthy meals.
- Keep fluids in your body. Water is the best choice.

## Sleeping

You may have trouble sleeping for a few months after surgery. Your sleep will improve over time. Avoid sleeping pills because they can have side effects. It is a good idea to take your pain medicine one hour before you go to bed. This will help you relax, control your pain and help you go to sleep easier.

Cervical patients — for the first few days, you may need to sleep with your head elevated. You can do this in bed with pillows or upright in a recliner. Please check with your spine doctor's office for time-frame.

## Driving

Have your coach or a loved one drive you until you are comfortable to drive on your own.

Please follow these guidelines before you drive on your own:

- You must **not** be taking your prescribed pain medicines.
- You must be able to walk without support.
- You must feel ready to safely drive.
- You need to be able to turn your head comfortably and safely (for cervical patients).

## YOUR FOLLOW-UP VISIT

After surgery, you will have a follow-up visit with your spine doctor or someone from your surgical care team. The purpose of this visit is to talk about your progress and the next steps of your treatment plan.

During this visit, your care team will:

- Take an x-ray of your spine and talk about your progress.
- Do a physical exam.
- Ask you questions about how well you are following your discharge instructions and recovery plan.
- Review your medicines, pain management and exercise program.
- Talk about your daily activities, which include returning to work.
- Discuss the next steps of your treatment plan.



## STAYING HEALTHY CHECKLIST

### Exercise

- Walking is the best exercise. Start with short frequent walks and increase as tolerated.
- Avoid high impact exercise such as running and weightlifting until your spine doctor clears you.

### Eat healthy

- Eat a balanced and healthy diet.
- Managing your weight will keep your spine healthy.

### Stay nicotine-free

- Nicotine affects your blood flow. This is harmful to your bones and soft tissues.
- Being nicotine-free is preventive medicine.
- Try to avoid second-hand smoke. Secondhand smoke can also be harmful.

### Live a healthy lifestyle

- Improve your overall health by getting regular check-ups.
- Know your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol and weight.
- It is important to stay healthy.

Thank you for choosing Washington University and BJC HealthCare for your spine care. Our goal is that you are well-prepared so if you have suggestions to improve this patient journey guide, please share your thoughts with someone on your care team.



*The journey of a thousand miles  
begins with a single step.*

*Lao Tzu*





