

Hospital in-patient stays are getting shorter, and the introduction of the Enhanced Recovery Programme for planned operations using laparoscopic surgery can mean that you are only in hospital for four days or less. Open surgery may mean a stay of up to ten days.

People may experience some anxiety when faced with leaving hospital after a major operation, about how they will manage at home and getting back to a normal routine. It may be several weeks before you feel that you have started to make a full recovery. In the first few days after coming home, you may find even simple tasks exhausting. It is common to feel very tired, and to need to sleep and rest much more frequently, because your body simply needs time to heal. Tiredness can also be caused by the side-effects of the anaesthetic, lack of sleep while you were in hospital, the side-effects of your pain killers or discomfort from the surgery itself.

### Getting back to normal

Don't be in a rush to get back to normal. It can be tempting to try to do everything you used to do before going into hospital, but this can make you more tired and frustrated. If you have people around, ask them to help with simple tasks like grocery shopping, or housework. This is especially useful for the first six weeks or so. If you live alone and do not have any support locally, there are organisations that can help for short periods, and this can often be arranged by your hospital team. Do ask for this help when you are first admitted to hospital so that proper arrangements can be made.

### Tips for recovery after bowel surgery

How quickly you recover from an operation depends on your previous level of health and fitness as well as the type of surgery. If you are going to have radiotherapy or chemotherapy, this will add to your recovery time. Here are some suggestions that may help:

- Take your painkillers regularly, as prescribed, until you no longer have pain or discomfort. You may need to do this for some weeks after surgery to help you move about comfortably.
- Get out of bed and get dressed every day, helping to build up your strength.
- Gradually start to increase your activity by doing some light jobs around the house.
- Tell friends and family that it will take some time (at least six weeks) before you are back to your normal self and able to undertake all your usual activities.
- Start doing some form of gentle exercise as soon as you can, several times a day. Start with a short walk (10 minutes) and increase the distance as you feel able. By about six weeks you should be able to walk for half an hour or more.
- Avoid lifting any heavy items and doing heavy household chores for at least six to ten weeks, thereby reducing the risk of developing a hernia or other complications.
- Drink plenty of fluids and eat light, nutritious meals frequently throughout the day.

### Bowel habit in the first weeks

Constipation is a common problem, which can be caused by a change in your diet, taking medications containing codeine and a general decrease in activity. If you are affected, do consider regular use of gentle laxatives prescribed by your doctor to ease discomfort. Diarrhoea, increased frequency or urgency of bowel motions can also be common problems after bowel surgery. Again, your doctor can prescribe medication to help with this.

### Your wound

If you have one large wound, following emergency surgery or if a laparoscopic procedure resulted in open surgery, this can result in a longer hospital stay. After keyhole surgery you may have two or three small wounds, which heal more quickly. If you have a large wound, your practice nurse will be able to remove your stitches or staples at around ten days after surgery, and will also help you to make sure any dressings are kept clean and secure. The district nurse can also do this for you, if it is arranged via the hospital or your GP in advance.



### Beating Bowel Cancer

Harlequin House | 7 High Street | Teddington | Middlesex | TW11 8EE

T 020 8973 0000 Nurse Helpline T 020 8973 0011

patients@beatingbowelcancer.org www.beatingbowelcancer.org

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## Things to look out for

Contact your specialist nurse or GP immediately if you experience any of these symptoms, which could be the result of an infection:

- a high temperature
- unable to eat or drink for any reason
- persistent diarrhoea, nausea or vomiting
- constipation for three days or more
- pain, swelling, redness or unexpected leakage around your wound or stoma.

## Longer term goals and challenges

### Psychological issues

It is very common to feel low in mood at times once you go home. You may be feeling tired and sore, but also have time on your hands now to think about everything that has happened in the last few weeks. Do try to allow yourself the space and time to come to terms with what has happened. Trying to put a brave face on things can leave you feeling more isolated.

Occasionally this low mood doesn't lift and interferes with day to day tasks and enjoyment of life. In this situation you may be suffering from clinical depression and it is a good idea to speak to your GP or specialist nurse. Medications or talking therapies can be offered if needed and may be very beneficial.

### Exercise

Whilst it is important to rest and recuperate, taking part in some normal day-to-day activities can be good physically and mentally. Maybe start by meeting a friend for a cup of coffee, or walking to the local shop to buy a newspaper. Your energy and confidence will return in time.

### Sexual activity

It is usually safe to resume sexual activity as and when you feel ready. Being intimate with cuddles and foreplay can help you to stay close to your partner until you feel ready for full intercourse. Gradually your sexual function should return to normal, but if in time you are still having problems, you should mention it to your specialist nurse. Please see our '**Living Well**' booklet for further information.

## Bowel habit

Your bowel movements may be loose, frequent and unpredictable for some time after surgery. You have had a section of your bowel removed and it is unlikely that your bowel habit will return to exactly how it was before. It could take a few weeks or sometimes months, but it should eventually settle down into a routine. Please see our '**Regaining Bowel Control**' factsheet for further information.

## Eating and drinking

You may find that you cannot tolerate some foods that you used to enjoy. This is all normal and part of the recovery process. Some foods may cause constipation, diarrhoea and / or wind; keeping a food diary may help you identify which foods seem to upset your bowels. Please see our '**Eating Well**' booklet for comprehensive advice on diet after bowel cancer.

## Driving

Don't drive for at least six weeks, until you are confident you can perform an emergency stop and you are no longer taking strong painkillers that may affect your concentration. Do check with your insurance company, as some insurers will not provide cover for a period of time following a general anaesthetic. Have someone with you when you start driving again if possible. Bowel surgery does not exempt you from wearing a seat belt.

## Going back to work

Speak to your GP and/or surgeon to confirm they are happy for you to go back to work - this is particularly important if your job involves physical activity. Your HR or occupational health department should be able to support you with any issues as you settle back to work.



If you have any questions or comments about this publication, or would like information on the evidence used to produce it, please write to us or email [info@beatingbowelcancer.org](mailto:info@beatingbowelcancer.org).

