

Discharge Guidelines

Lower Extremity Resection of a Malignant Soft Tissue Mass Thigh/Leg/Foot

Please note: These are general guidelines to help answer the most common questions after surgery. The photos in these guidelines WILL NOT necessarily match your exact surgical site. Your surgeon/team may ADAPT these guidelines depending on YOUR SPECIFIC NEEDS and/or current research.



Well-healing incision following resection of a soft tissue sarcoma in the left thigh without preop radiation.



Soft tissue sarcoma of the ankle following preop radiation and resection.

Daily Incision Care

Many times, plastic surgeons work with us to perform complex muscle flaps and/or skin grafts to close the defect created when tumors are removed. The plastic surgery team will provide you with specific incision care instructions.

- If you had a muscle flap or skin graft, you will be given specific instructions for incision care and showering.
- Look at your incision and check for openings, swelling, redness, changes in color, drainage or bleeding. If you detect any of the above problems, contact your surgeon's office.
- Sometimes patients are discharged with a drain at the incision site. You will be instructed on how to care for the drain until your post-operative visit. Drains will be removed when the output is less than 30 mLs per day.
- Change your dry dressing daily or leave uncovered if there is no drainage.
- You may shower 4 days after surgery if you did not have a flap and/or skin graft.
- Staples or sutures (unless dissolvable sutures were used) usually are removed 3-4 weeks from the date of surgery. They are left in longer if you had radiation or chemotherapy.
- Once the staples/sutures are removed, you can use vitamin E lotion, aloe cream or any moisturizer to massage your incision.
- A visiting nurse may come to your house for a few visits to assist you with your incision care.

Activity

These tips are simply guidelines. Your activity level will vary depending on a number of factors including the size and location of your incision, whether you have had chemotherapy or radiation, and whether you have had a muscle flap or skin graft.

- A physical therapist may come to your house to provide you with activity guidelines and an exercise plan.
- Use supports (crutches, cane, walker) as directed to keep excess weight off the extremity. You can gradually increase weight bearing as you begin to feel comfortable.
- Avoid lifting/carrying heavy objects when using supports (crutches, cane, walk); you are a high risk for a fall.
- A brace or other support may also be prescribed to provide additional support.
- Avoid hot tubs and saunas, especially if you have had radiation therapy. The heat could damage the skin in the treatment area.
- Return to driving varies by patient and which leg was operated on. Patients with surgery on their right leg may take longer to get back to driving. You MUST be off narcotics. It is always best to resume driving after discussion with your surgeon.
- You may return to work or school if you limit activities that involve using the leg/foot that has been operated on.

Diet

- Your appetite may be less than normal after surgery.
- Incorporate proteins and plenty of fluids into your diet, both of which will aid in the healing process.
- If you are taking narcotics, you should take some type of laxative to prevent opioid-induced constipation.
- Adding supplemental drinks (e.g. Ensure, Boost, and Carnation Instant Breakfast) to your diet will be beneficial if you have lost weight due to chemotherapy or radiation.
- Chemotherapy compounded by the effects of surgery may cause some stomach irritation during your recovery period. Take anti-nausea medications as directed by your surgeon or nurse practitioner. Replacing large meals with several smaller meals spread throughout the day may also be helpful.

Medication

- Continue to take your regular medications.
- If necessary, take prescribed pain medication (narcotics) as directed.
- DO NOT drink alcohol or drive while taking narcotic pain medication.
- If you are taking narcotics, you should take some type of laxative to prevent opioid-induced constipation.
- You most likely will be discharged on a blood thinner to prevent clots, usually Lovenox (subcutaneous injection) for 2-4 weeks (no blood tests are necessary). Newer, direct oral anti-coagulation medications may be prescribed, or continued if you came to the hospital already taking these types of medications (Eliquis, Plavix, Pradaxa, Xarelto).
- Previously Coumadin was given. If you are on Coumadin, you will resume this for your anti-coagulation regimen. Blood tests are necessary for Coumadin; the INR range needs to be between 1.5 and 2.0.
- If you are discharged on a blood thinner administered via daily injection, no blood tests are necessary.
- You may be advised to take just an aspirin daily to prevent blood clots.

Pain

- Your surgical team understands that you will experience different levels and types of pain following your surgery. You will be prescribed a narcotic, if you wish. Some patients decline a narcotic due to the current opioid crisis and request milder pain medications (tramadol), and/or just take Tylenol alternating with anti-inflammatory medications (Advil, Motrin, Aleve), if tolerated. When we prescribe narcotics, we must do so per current state and federal regulations, which includes a narcotic contract.

- Because of the current focus on opioid addiction, we recommend a multitude of cognitive behavioral techniques, such as imagery, mindfulness, psychotherapy, deep breathing exercises, virtual reality for distraction, journaling, video games, TENS unit (muscle stimulators that can be used at home) and all other integrative care therapies (physical therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic, massage, lymphedema treatment, reiki).

Common Problems

- It is normal to feel tired after you are discharged.
- If you experience pain and/or swelling, try elevating the site for relief or apply ice – use caution not to leave on more than 20 minutes to prevent frost burn.
- If you develop a firm lump in the incisional area, and your overlying skin looks black and blue, you may have developed a postoperative hematoma (blood collection at the operative site where the mass was removed). Notify your surgeon's office.
- Your leg may seem heavy after surgery. This is due to your muscle weakness. Your strength and ability to control your leg will increase over time.
- You may experience numbness at your incision site. This is normal and usually decreases in time.
- If you have had chemotherapy and are experiencing anything unusual that could be a sign of infection such as a high temperature, cough, sore throat, chills or sweating call your radiation oncologist IMMEDIATELY. Chemotherapy can weaken your immune system for a period of time, so any of these symptoms could become dangerous if they are not treated quickly.
- If you have had radiation therapy, the area of skin where you receive treatment may feel dry and itchy. The skin in this area may also darken and/or peel. These symptoms should lessen within a few weeks of stopping radiation treatments. Do not scrub or use soap on the affected area. Avoid exposing the treated area to direct sunlight. Talk to your radiation oncologist about using an appropriate sunscreen. These precautions will help your skin heal more quickly.
- Lymphedema is chronic swelling caused by a build-up of fluid that occurs when the lymphatic system is faulty or damaged. Tumor resection, especially following radiation, can cause lymphedema. Please refer to our patient guide: *Lymphedema – What you Need to Know* (www.massgeneral.org/orthoncology/lymphedema).
- For constipation (not being able to move your bowels), drink plenty of water and non-carbonated fluids, and eat foods that are high in fiber (e.g. bran, prunes, fruit, whole wheat breads). There are numerous over-the-counter medications available to help relieve constipation such as Dulcolax, Magnesium Citrate, or Miralax. Ask your local pharmacist to assist you in finding one that is right for you.
- If you smoked cigarettes before the surgery, DO NOT START SMOKING AGAIN! Smoking (the nicotine) causes constriction of blood vessels preventing adequate blood flow to the operative area and can delay healing. If you need assistance with this, please contact the MGH Quit Smoking Service at 617-726-7443.

Returning to Work/School

- The length of disability following surgery varies depending on the type of work you do. You may return to school or a sedentary type job much earlier than you would return to a job requiring physical labor.
- You should give yourself AT LEAST 2-6 months to recover before thinking about going back to work/school. Everyone responds differently, but most require this time for extensive physical therapy. Then, if you follow the activity guidelines given by your surgeon, you can return to work/school when you feel ready.
- Disability forms will be completed at your preoperative visit or as soon as they arrive at our office. All patient portions of the form MUST BE completed and signed by you the patient.
- Handicap placard applications will be completed if necessary. Forms can be obtained by the Registry of Motor Vehicles and then mailed to our office.

Follow-up

- If you are discharged with a drain, your follow-up appointment is one week after discharge to check drain output and most often remove the drain.
- Schedule an appointment with your surgeon for 2-3 weeks from the date of surgery or sooner if instructed.
- If you are discharged to a rehabilitation facility, make an appointment to see your surgeon before you are discharged from that facility.
- If chemotherapy or radiation is planned after surgery, you can resume those treatments once we inspect your incision and give clearance.
- Once you complete the initial post-operative visits to check your incision, you will progress to routine oncologic surveillance visits, which are as follows: every 3 months (x2 years); every six months (x3 years); followed by annual visits (x5 years) for a total of 10 years of surveillance.

Questions/Concerns

- For any questions, call your surgeon/nurse practitioner.
- Drs. Kevin Raskin, Joseph Schwab, Santiago Lozano-Calderon: 617-724-3700
- Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Anne Fiore: 617-724-7630

These instructions are basic post-procedure guidelines. Your surgeon/nurse practitioner may give you more specific instructions. Refer to our website for more information: <http://www.massgeneral.org/ortho-oncology/education>

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