

# Five Things to Expect from Physical Therapy After Spine Surgery

**Y**ou've taken a major step toward eliminating chronic back or neck pain by undergoing spinal surgery to fix the underlying cause. But for most patients, that's not the end of the process. Physical therapy, or PT, typically follows surgery to help patients get the greatest possible benefit, according to Sridhar Yalamanchili, PT, MSPT, director of rehabilitation at Atlantic Spine Center, with locations in New Jersey and New York.

"Physical therapists work with patients in several ways to help them recover from surgery, heal from the condition that required the surgery, and bounce back into good physical condition," says Yalamanchili. "Undergoing spine surgery is daunting, and patients want to improve their odds of a complete recovery. PT has been proven by research to maximize those odds."

But many patients have never undergone PT prior to spine surgery and don't know what to anticipate, Yalamanchili notes. He offers five tips on what to expect and explains the ways physical therapy can benefit you.

## **PT will be tailored to your specific needs.**

**1.** Physical therapy is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, with all patients receiving the same treatment. Instead, once you've been cleared for PT after surgery — which typically happens 2-6 weeks later — your physical therapist will conduct an initial evaluation to assess exactly what you need.

This evaluation will include taking a medical history, particularly of any surgery-related complications; a postural assessment, which looks at your spine while standing and sitting; range-of-motion tests to determine your spinal mobility; a flexibility assessment; and strength tests of not only your back muscles, but those in your abdomen, hips, thighs and even lower legs. Additionally, your physical therapist will



assess your overall post-surgical function regarding your ability to work and participate in normal activities.

## **PT will help minimize your pain.**

**2.** Controlling pain is a crucial first step in helping patients regain their strength, so physical therapists use several ways to help you minimize pain, including applying ice to key spots; moving the patient into certain positions; and using special electrical devices such as TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) units that send stimulating pulses across skin and nerves.

## **PT will help retrain your muscles.**

**3.** After spine surgery, muscles may need special retraining to regain strength and provide optimal stability to the spine and surrounding structures. A course of PT will achieve this by focusing on muscles in the incision area; muscles that were weakened by nerve problems before surgery; small muscles that surround each vertebra; and muscles and joints that can promote full range of motion in each patient, depending on their body type and normal physical activities.

## **PT will teach you exercises that are best for you.**

**4.** Exercise doesn't just strengthen muscles and promote flexibility, it also helps spine surgery patients eliminate fatigue, move about safely and avoid re-injury. Physical therapists individualize patients' exercise plans — including both stationary and aerobic exercise — based on knowledge of your specific type of spine surgery and the forces that would benefit your spine under different conditions. Much of a patient's ability to return to favorite pre-surgery activities depends on their response to these exercises.

## **PT is a collaborative process.**

**5.** Physical therapy is a dynamic, interactive scenario, Yalamanchili says, not a situation where the patient is merely doing what's ordered. One-on-one PT sessions typically include plenty of chances to ask questions, and therapists can explain what bodily changes have resulted from the patient's surgery and what they can do to maximize the benefits of that surgery. You must work hard to reap the benefits, he says.

"Successfully recovering from spine surgery relies on each patient's willingness to work diligently at home as well as with their physical therapist," Yalamanchili says. "In the best-case scenario, spine surgery brings patients a great deal of the way toward recovery and physical therapy takes them the rest of the way, making their recovery the best one possible."

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