

Excerpt: Living With A Colectomy: A Guide For Families
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Recovering From A Colectomy

You may have big goals for once you “feel better” after surgery, but your body may have other plans.

Remember that you just had surgery, and your surgery recovery and feelings of tiredness continue for several weeks. Give yourself grace if you can't immediately do everything you want.

For the greatest success, follow your doctor's instructions. They may be printed on an after-visit summary given to you at the doctor's office or hospital, a patient handout, or pre-surgical education. Your future depends on the choices you make today.

Home Care After A Colectomy

Caring for your loved one immediately can be a daunting task, particularly if they have not been eating solid foods much. It's OK to be nervous if you have never cared for someone after a surgery before. Caregivers do take on a large amount of responsibility, for the day-to-day care and the “what if's.”

Respect your patient's needs and help them balance recovery with a growing desire for independence.

Tips for helping your patient with recovery include:

- Continue breathing exercises.
- Keep the pain medication on schedule as prescribed in the initial days; don't wait until the pain becomes unmanageable and you're having to chase it to get down.
- Take brief walks. These may be shorter walks than you are typically used to. They may be as simple as walking to the mailbox or corner.
- Use comfort measures such as sitting in a recliner or using a heating pad.
- Respect whether your loved one wants visitors in the home while in recovery, and this may change hour to hour.
- Remind them they don't have to answer every call and can put their phone on silent when they are feeling less talkative. Calls and messages can be returned.

Talk with the surgeon and other members of the healthcare team about any questions you have, even once your patient is out of the hospital. Often you can send messages online through MyChart or other electronic health records system, or you can place a phone call.

Reasons to call your doctor or seek immediate medical care after colon resection surgery include:

- Pain that does not get better after you take pain medicine
- Unable to pass stools or gas for more than 24 hours, or what your physician advises
- Nausea or vomiting; cannot keep fluids down
- Not able to take anything by mouth for 24 hours
- Abdominal swelling or pain
- Bright red blood has soaked through your bandage
- Loose stitches, or your incision comes open
- Fever
- Pain in your calf, back of the knee, thigh, or groin, which are signs of a blood clot in your leg
- Redness and swelling in your leg or groin
- Increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness
- Red streaks leading from the incision
- Pus draining from the incision
- High ostomy output and/or dark urine or no urine

Go to the emergency room if you have chest pain or shortness of breath.

Sleep

Before you go to the hospital, discuss sleeping arrangements for after your return home.

A spouse or significant other might not consider sleeping arrangements at home in the initial weeks after surgery. Much like with a c-section, abdominal pain can be a very real reality during the initial recovery period following a colectomy. A person who tosses and turns in their sleep or sleeps with their body overlapping the other person may need to consider sleeping on a sofa or air mattress during the initial healing period. Remember also that what was once a comfortable sleep position may no longer be. Consider laying on your back with your head propped up with pillows, placing pillows in strategic positions to ease discomfort, or sleeping in an armchair.

Getting up and down throughout the night to assist with medications, going to the bathroom or other helping your patient become more comfortable may be part of your initial return home, so plan where your caregiver sleeps accordingly.

Tips for getting a good night's sleep include:

- Have a regular sleep routine
- Get some form of exercise or stress reduction daily
- Cut down on caffeine
- Reduce lights in your room to create a darkened space
- Remove distractions
- Keep a notepad on your bed to jot down any thoughts you need to act on later.

Pain Management

While your surgeon will work with you on pain control in the period after surgery, you'll likely have some temporary help in the form of prescription or over-the-counter medications such as ibuprofen or Aleve to help reduce inflammation. If you are on Norco, do not take Tylenol, as both medications have acetaminophen, and too much can be hard on your liver.

Since you've had surgery in your abdominal area, you'll want to splint the area by holding a pillow against it while coughing or deep breathing.

Be sure to talk to your doctor if the pain does not go away in the recovery process or gets worse over time. Other pain relief options such as a nerve block may ultimately be considered if other measures do not work.

Non-prescription ways to help reduce pain include heating pads, lidocaine patches, distraction with music, favorite shows or podcasts, and guided imagery. Finding creative outlets such as music or art have been shown to reduce depression, pain and tiredness and improve immune function.

Passing The Time

Recovering from a colectomy can take weeks or months, and previous hobbies and activities may not be an option for some time. You may have pain, complications, or an ostomy to contend with.

Here are ideas to pass the time while recovering from colon surgery:

- Read that novel you've been meaning to read.
- Write in a journal.
- Learn stress-reducing techniques like meditation, visualization or contemplative prayer.
- Organize your photos.
- Plan an outing or day trip (or go bigger!) for when you've fully recovered.
- Plan next year's garden.
- Create a Pinterest board for that next house project.
- Plan those home projects and recruit help.

- Meal prep for when you return to work or regular activities.
- Write thank you notes to those who helped.
- Volunteer from home. Sites such as VolunteerMatch, Points of Light, DoSomething.org, GiveGab and Encoure.org can offer ideas for remote volunteer work..
- Learn a new skill online.
- Update your LinkedIn profile or resume.
- Discover a new podcast.

Exercise

Daily physical activity - everything from stretching to walking - helps your body with the digestion process and helps prevent buildup of intestinal gas and constipation. Try to walk each day. Start by walking a little more than you did the day before. Bit by bit, increase the amount you walk, building up to 30 minutes or more most days of the week.

Walking provides additional benefits for surgery recovery, as it boosts blood flow and helps prevent pneumonia and constipation.

Avoid strenuous activities, such as biking, jogging, weight lifting, or aerobic exercise, until your doctor says.

Avoid lifting anything that would make you strain until your doctor gives you permission. This may include heavy grocery bags, milk jugs, a heavy briefcase or backpack, cat litter or dog food bags, a vacuum cleaner or a child.

Driving

Driving is not recommended for at least two weeks and until you have stopped taking narcotic pain medications. However you may find that while you're cleared to drive, you may have stiffness or soreness while driving a vehicle, particularly when turning or making quick movements. Ease into driving, and start with a brief drive around your block at a quiet time of day to test how you feel.

Bowel Movements

Particularly in the first few weeks after colon resection, you'll likely experience more frequent, looser bowel movements than you did before the surgery. Be sure that you're drinking adequate fluids to prevent dehydration.

To prevent constipation, make sure to eat adequate fiber, continue physical activity, drink liquids and don't ignore the urge to go. Fiber supplements, laxatives or stool softeners can be used if your physician recommends it.

To prevent diarrhea, limit high-fat foods and choose more plant-based foods. Additionally, limit caffeinated, carbonated and alcoholic beverages, all of which can irritate the stomach.

From a personal comfort standpoint, invest in extra toilet paper or wipes, and consider an air freshener or diffuser to reduce potential embarrassment.

Ostomy

Some people will require a colostomy bag to remove their waste after their colon resection surgeries. While it sounds rare, about 1 million people are currently living with an ostomy, according to the United Ostomy Associations of America.

Instead of having a regular bowel movement, a colostomy bag is attached to the stoma on your abdomen. These bags may be a closed bag that needs changing multiple times a day or drainable bags that need to be replaced every few days. Colostomy bags have air filters with charcoal that can neutralize the smell.

A nurse specializing in stoma care can help train you on the proper use of your colostomy supplies. You may learn about this in the hospital, in the outpatient setting or in home care.

You will be able to do most forms of exercise with a stoma, and you can travel and do most jobs without issue.

Other options include irrigation, or using an enema in your stoma to rinse your bowels. This is an hour-long task that requires a routine time commitment each day.

Living With Short Bowel Syndrome

After a colon resection, particularly one that removes a large portion of your colon, you may be living with short bowel syndrome. Short bowel syndrome is when your remaining bowel adapts after surgery and can include recurring symptoms such as:

- Abdominal pain
- Bloating
- Cramping
- Dehydration
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue
- Food sensitivity

- Gas
- Heartburn
- Weakness
- Weight loss.

Short bowel syndrome impacts about 3 out of every 1 million people.

If you have short bowel syndrome, experts suggest these tips to ease discomfort:

- Eat more frequent, smaller meals that are easier to digest.
- Consider drinking liquids between meals instead of during meals.
- Eat more protein.
- Choose complex carbohydrates instead of simple sugars, which can cause diarrhea.
- Take a multivitamin each day.
- Limit your alcohol and caffeine intake.

Living with short bowel syndrome can be physically uncomfortable for the patient and may require changes for the family. This may mean having a bathroom available for the patient, particularly in the initial weeks after colon resection surgery, planning ahead that the other adult in the home is on call for rides for children to activities, and delays or changes to family activities that were once routine.

For some people, short bowel syndrome will be a temporary problem while your body adjusts to having a shortened intestinal tract.

Small Bowel Obstruction

A small bowel obstruction is a possible complication that requires medical attention. This is when a blockage in your bowels prevents contents from moving through your intestines. Signs are abdominal pain or distention, vomiting of fecal matter, and constipation.