

Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust
London Road
Reading RG1 5AN
0118 322 5111
www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Written by Ruth Moxon, May 2011
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Following oesophagectomy or gastrectomy

Information for patients

This booklet is for patients who have undergone a gastrectomy for cancer of the oesophagus. It outlines what you can expect afterwards and gives advice about what you can eat and resuming normal activities after your operation.

Everyone is different and we all recover at different rates but usually it takes several weeks before you start to feel normal. When you are discharged from hospital it is quite common to have a few days when you don't feel as well as you did. Do not worry, this period soon passes.

What will I be given to take home?

Medication and a letter for your GP - The nurses will explain what the tablets are for and when to take them. Painkillers are included in the week's supply of tablets, which you must take. The GP letter is brief. It informs the doctor about your operation and medication. A more detailed letter is sent later.

An outpatients appointment date - This is an appointment to see your surgeon in four to six weeks time to check that everything is progressing satisfactorily. The appointment may have to be sent by post. If you have not received one after a few weeks please telephone your consultant's secretary.

Will I still have pain?

You will be given painkillers to go home with. It is important you carry on taking the maximum dose for at least 2–3 weeks after discharge. Once you feel the pain is subsiding then you can slowly reduce the number taken. Some patients are still taking painkillers when they are seen in outpatients.

Support groups

Oesophageal Patients Association
22 Vulcan House
Vulcan Road
Solihull
West Midlands B91 2JY
Telephone: 0121 704 9860
www.opa.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support
Telephone: 0808 808 00 00
www.macmillan.org.uk

Upper GI Specialist Nurse
Royal Berkshire Hospital
London Road
Reading RG1 5AN
Telephone: 0118 322 7748

Reading Upper GI and Laparoscopic Surgical Partnership website
www.lapsurg.info/

(breakfast, elevenses, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and a couple of snacks later).

- Take plenty of time with each meal and leave about 15 minutes between your main course and pudding or have the pudding as a 'between meal' snack. Chew your food well and add extra gravy or sauce as needed.
- If you wear dentures – check that they fit properly especially if you have lost a lot of weight. Contact your dentist if they are loose.
- At mealtimes, you will find it easier to sit upright at a table. Sitting in an easy chair can increase any discomfort with eating. Never force yourself to eat too much.
- At night, if you suffer from regurgitation or heartburn avoid eating within two hours of going to bed. If the problem persists, consult your GP who can prescribe you medicine to reduce the discomfort.
- Your sense of taste may be affected and your favourite foods and drinks, especially tea, may taste different. This normally resolves itself within six weeks.
- After the operation you may lose the sensation of hunger. This is a common problem and the feeling of hunger may never return. It is important to ensure you eat regular meals and snacks even if you are not in the mood.
- Avoid filling yourself up with foods of a low energy value such as fruit, vegetables and salad. Even drinks will fill you up, so keep drinks until after meals and snacks. Aim to have six drinks a day. Soup with a low energy value, e.g. packet types, should be avoided.
- When out of the house always be prepared to carry a snack with you to eat in between meals, e.g. biscuits, cheese and crackers, scone, teacake or chocolate.

in time it should pass. If you are worried or have problems do not hesitate to contact the ward or specialist nurse for advice.

It is only natural after a stressful experience that you or your family may become over-cautious. It is important they allow you to do things for yourself but are there to support you when needed.

Should I exercise?

When you leave hospital you should be able to climb a full flight of stairs. Prior to discharge your physiotherapist will instruct you in exercises to perform when you are at home. Gradually increase the amount of exercise you do as your ability allows.

When should I go back to work?

It should be 3–4 months before you consider returning to work and initially you should return on a part time basis. Remember you will tire quickly at first. You need to take time to plan your meals and snacks during the working day.

The timing of your return to work depends on the type of work you do. Heavy manual work makes more demands on the body and may be unsuitable if much lifting and bending is involved. In these cases, hopefully your employer may be able to offer you a lighter job. You can get a sick certificate from the hospital for the time of your stay. After this you will need to get further certificates from your GP.

What about sex?

There are no specific guidelines for sexual activity. If you experience a loss of interest in sex following your operation, it will probably be 1–2 months before the desire returns. You may need to adopt different positions; discuss this with your partner.

Will I be able to drive?

Due to surgery the muscles and tissues are temporarily damaged and you will feel sore. However, you do not need to tell the DVLA about your operation. You should be able to drive as soon as you feel fit enough to do so. Usually allow 2–3 weeks for your wound to heal well and for driving to feel more comfortable. It is surprising how much twisting and turning is involved. However it is advisable to check your motor insurance to ensure that you are covered to drive (occasionally, they require a certain amount of time to elapse before you start to drive again).

Remember to wear a seatbelt or get an exemption certificate from your GP.

Can I go on holiday?

After an operation many patients find a holiday helps them and their family recover from the stress of surgery. As soon as it feels comfortable you should be able to travel including by air if you wish. Always make sure you have adequate travel insurance.

Will I ever feel normal again?

While you are recovering, any activity you undertake will seem like hard work and it is very important to take plenty of rest. During the first two weeks at home you should have at least two 20–30 minute rest periods. You do not have to go to bed, just make yourself comfortable and relax.

At night you may find sleeping propped up by pillows will prevent regurgitation.

Do not worry if some days you feel tired or depressed, this is quite a normal reaction to any surgery. Try to maintain a positive attitude and

- Weight gain can be difficult – if you are maintaining your weight you are doing very well.

What foods should I eat?

As you will be eating smaller quantities of food you need to ensure you have a balanced diet and maintain your weight. It does take some time to adjust to the new way of eating and initially you may lose weight. Certain foods may upset you but this varies from person to person. Avoid that food for the time being – you may be able to try again at a later date.

Meat and fish and alternatives - give good sources of protein, calories, iron and B vitamins. All meat can be eaten. Start with softer meat (mince) then try stews and casseroles where the meat is cooked until very tender. Gradually try other cuts (roast, chops etc.). Ensure they are cooked until tender and add gravy or sauce if needed. Be careful with fish to ensure all the bones are removed. Add a sauce as required. Mayonnaise or salad cream can be added to some tinned fish, e.g. tuna. Well-cooked eggs, beans and pulses are also good sources of protein.

Bread, cereals and potatoes - these are good sources of energy and fibre. Bread may have been difficult to eat before the operation. Start with toast and wholemeal bread, which are less doughy. You may wish to avoid fresh, white bread. (Small quantities of) breakfast cereals with milk and sugar or honey can be eaten.

All types of potatoes can be eaten – mash, boiled, roast and chips. Add extra butter to boiled potatoes to increase energy. Well-cooked rice and pasta can be used in place of potatoes

Milk and dairy foods - milk, cheese and yoghurt are good sources of energy; protein and calcium but be careful as full fat milk products may cause diarrhoea in some people.

Fruit and vegetables - provide a range of vitamins, minerals and fibre. Include one or two small portions of vegetables with your main meal. Initially, cook vegetables until just soft and remove any hard stalks in cabbage cauliflower and broccoli. Start with soft fruits (stewed fruit, banana, melon etc.). Take care to chew properly. If you wish to include harder fruits, remove skin and eat slowly. Citrus fruits, such as oranges, should have all pith removed and be chewed properly. A glass of fruit juice or vitamin C enriched drink (e.g. blackcurrant) should be taken daily.

Fatty and sugary foods - adding butter, margarine, oil or mayonnaise to foods increases their energy value. For example, butter on potatoes and vegetables and mayonnaise in tinned fish or eggs, grated cheese in sauces, cream in puddings and cereals. Sugar can be added to hot drinks, cereals and puddings. Start with small quantities and increase as tolerated. Cakes, biscuits and chocolate are a good choice for snacks. Include puddings – creamed rice, trifle, mousse etc.

Supplements - there is a range of nourishing drinks available on prescription from your GP, which provide extra nutrients to supplement your diet. All come in a variety of flavours – sweet and savoury. The following are available on prescription from your GP:

Milk-shake style drinks: Ensure Plus, Ensure, Fortisip, Clinutren, Resource, Fresubin, and Entera.

If you don't like the taste of 'milkshakes' there are alternative fruit flavoured supplements such as: Enlive, Fortijuce, Provide Xtra, Clinutren Fruit, Resource Fruit Flavour.

You can also buy the following from the chemist or supermarket: Build Up powder, which can be made up with milk and comes in sweet and natural flavours. There are also savoury/soup flavours that are made with boiling milk or water. Complan can be made with milk or water. It also comes in a variety of sweet, savoury and natural flavours.

Will I ever gain weight ?

This can be very difficult after surgery and initially some patients continue to lose some weight.

- Eat little and often.
- Eat favourite foods.
- Try to make food colourful and more appetising.
- If you can't manage or face eating a meal don't miss the meal - have a liquid meal soup or a supplement drink.
- Take a snack with you when you go out.
- Try adding a measure (25 mls) of brandy, sherry or liqueur to a hot drink e.g. coffee or hot chocolate – this gives about 55 extra calories.
- Try to eat sweets, nuts, chocolate and crisps as small snacks.

Weight gain will come but can take time - don't be tempted to weigh yourself more than once a month. Eventually your body will find its own "ideal weight" and you will find your weight fluctuates about this new level.