



Exercises and advice to help you recover after surgery

This leaflet explains your physiotherapy management following your operation. It will explore both the respiratory (breathing) and rehabilitation (recovery) aspects of what to expect after surgery. If you normally suffer from breathing problems, or if you have had an operation that involved a large incision (cut), a physiotherapist may come and see you on the ward after your operation.

Not every patient will see a physiotherapist, so this leaflet outlines some easy exercises and actions you can do yourself at home to help you recover.

Helping your lungs recover

General anaesthetic affects your lungs, plus the pain from your wound can make taking a deep breath and coughing difficult and painful. This means that sputum (mucus) can collect in your lungs. We encourage you to practise deep breathing, coughing and mobilising about after surgery, to help clear that sputum and prevent you from developing a chest infection.

It is important to start clearing any sputum as soon as possible after your operation. Coughing will not damage any stitches or staples.

Pain

If you are in pain, use your pain relief pump button (if you have one), otherwise remember to take regular painkillers, following the recommended dosage. Speak to your nurse if you feel that your pain is not being managed adequately. It is vital that you are comfortable enough to breathe deeply, cough and mobilise.

Breathing exercises

Do the following deep breathing exercises while sitting as upright as possible in the chair.

1. Relax your shoulders and upper chest.
2. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose to fill your lungs as full as you can.
3. Hold your breath for 3 seconds.
4. Breathe out slowly through your mouth.

Take 3 to 6 of these deep breaths, then rest.

Practice this exercise frequently, making sure you do it at least 3 to 4 times every hour while you are awake.

Incentive spirometry

If you have had an open surgery with a large wound, you may have been given an 'incentive spirometer' by a physiotherapist. This device helps you take deeper breaths and clear your chest effectively.

Complete 10 breaths **in** every hour through the incentive spirometer.



Coughing

Coughing is the normal way to clear sputum from your lungs. You will need to do this more often in the first few days following your operation.

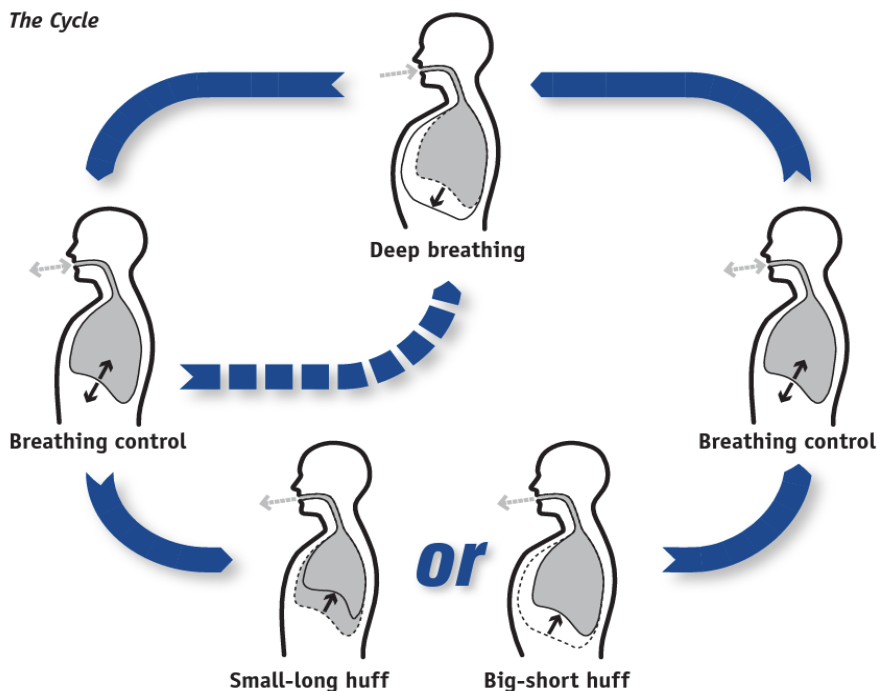
To help you cough, support your wound firmly with a towel or pillow (as pictured) to ease any discomfort from your wound.



Airway clearance

If you are finding clearing your chest more difficult than normal, you can use the Active Cycle of Breathing Technique (see below) to help:

The Cycle



Huffing is a forced breath out through your open mouth, as if steaming up a mirror.

You should aim to continue doing this cycle until you feel you have cleared the sputum off of your chest. Try to do this at least twice a day (morning and evening).

If you'd like more information on the Active Cycle of Breathing Technique, you can find this on the ACPRC website www.acprc.org.uk/Data/Publication_Downloads/GL-05ACBT.pdf.

If you don't have access to the internet, ask your physiotherapist to show you how to 'huff' before you leave hospital.

Bed based exercises

1. Ankle pumps – Bring your toes up towards you, then point them away 10 times with both feet. Rest and repeat 3 times. Do this exercise at least twice a day.	
2. Heel slides – Slowly bend your knee and hip, sliding your heel towards your bottom, then slide your heel away and straighten your leg. Do this 10 times on each leg. Rest and repeat 3 times. Do this exercise at least twice a day.	
3. Straight leg raise – Keeping your knee straight, slowly lift your leg off the bed and lower again. Do this 10 times on each leg. Rest and repeat 3 times. Do this exercise at least twice a day.	

Sitting out of bed

The best activity for your lungs is to get back up on your feet as soon after your operation as possible. Gentle activity will also help get your bowels working again and helps to keep your circulation moving.

The nursing or physiotherapy staff will help to sit you out of bed either on the first morning after your operation or on the same day. Drips or drains can move with you and will not stop you from getting out of bed. You should aim to sit out of bed twice a day, gradually increasing the amount of time each day.

Chair-based exercises

1. Marching on the spot – While seated, march your legs up and down for a count of 10. Rest and repeat 3 times. Do this exercise at least twice a day.	
2. Calf raises – Lift your feet up onto your tip toes and back down for a count of 10. Rest and repeat 3 times. Do this exercise at least twice a day.	
3. Knee extension – Kick your leg out in front of you, hold your leg out straight for at least 3 seconds before lowering again. Repeat, kicking out the other leg. Do this 10 times, alternating each leg. Rest and repeat 3 times. Do this exercise at least twice a day.	

Walking

Walking after surgery is extremely important; this will start on the day of your operation or on the first day after your operation. The nursing or physiotherapy staff will help you until you can walk safely by yourself. Once you can do so, you will be responsible for walking regularly and increasing the distance that you can go.

You may feel some weakness and tiredness when you first start walking, but this is normal. Most people are moving around freely within 3-5 days of surgery.

The benefits of walking after surgery:

- Promotes independence
- Prevents chest infections
- Prevents wound and urine infection
- Decreases the risk of developing blood clots
- Increases strength, fitness and endurance

Stairs

You will not routinely be taken to try the stairs unless you have a particular concern. If you are worried about going up or coming down the stairs after surgery, discuss it with your physiotherapist or nurse.

Contact us

For any queries or if you require advice regarding the use of the equipment you have been given, please contact the department on the numbers below:

General Surgical Ward: 0118 322 7539 or email RBFT.gsu@nhs.net

Surgical Physiotherapists: 0118 322 7817

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RBFT Physiotherapy Department, October 2025.

Next review due: October 2027