

Get Well Soon

Helping you make a speedy recovery after a Thyroidectomy



The Royal College
of Surgeons of England

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Thyroidectomy

This leaflet is a guide to recovering from a thyroidectomy. It does not provide specific medical advice or diagnosis. Nor does it give advice about whether you should consent to an operation. All of these matters depend on individual medical advice from your consultant surgeon based on your own health, medical condition and personal circumstances.

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WHO THIS LEAFLET IS FOR

This leaflet is to help you make plans for your recovery if you're about to have surgery to remove part, or all of your thyroid gland. The technical term for your operation is a Thyroidectomy, which is how your surgeon and other health professionals who are helping you may refer to it. It should be read in conjunction with any other information you have already been given about your procedure.

The advice in this leaflet offers broad guidelines for people who do not have any complications with their surgery, or other specific medical circumstances, such as a long-term condition. Your surgeon, GP and other healthcare professionals will offer you a lot of very good advice - but ultimately it's you that has to make the decision.

Obviously, every individual has different needs and recovers in different ways – so not all the advice in this leaflet will be suitable for everybody. When you're weighing up how to make the decision that's right for you, talk to your Occupational Health service at work, if you have one. Otherwise, talk to your GP. Either one will help you to make the right choices for a safe and speedy recovery.

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WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER THE OPERATION

Scar

You will have one scar, 3-4 inches across, along your collar line. This will run horizontally along the natural lines of the skin in your neck. After a few weeks it should be healing well, and after 12 months or so it will hardly be visible.

Stitches/Clips

With thyroid surgery, many treatment centres now use skin clips on the outside of the neck instead of stitches. These will normally be removed before you go home, 2-3 days after your operation.

Dressings

You do not need to keep the wound covered with a dressing. Exposure to the air will help the wound to heal more quickly. You can wash as normal after the clips have been removed, but take care to pat the wound dry gently.

Discomfort

After the operation, your neck will be quite sore, and you will be given medication to take home to ease the pain. You may find it painful to swallow for a short period after the operation, so a softer diet may be required.

Some patients also experience a tingling sensation in their hands, fingers, and around their lips or their nose. This is because the calcium levels in your blood can be affected by a thyroidectomy. If you feel any tingling, be sure to tell the staff who are looking after you (or your GP, if it happens after you return home). You may need a short course of tablets to restore the calcium levels in your blood.

Tiredness & Feeling Emotional

After any operation, your body is using a lot of energy to heal itself, so you will feel more tired than normal.

With a thyroid operation, there is another reason for tiredness. The thyroid produces hormones which control the speed at which your body works. If you've had more than half of your thyroid removed, you will need to take Thyroxine tablets for the rest of your life - this is to replace the hormone which your thyroid used to produce. You will have blood tests before you leave hospital to make sure that you have the right level of this hormone in your blood. You will have regular check-ups once a year to make sure that you have the right level of thyroxine.

Painkillers

Painkillers may well cause constipation, so it's important to get plenty of fibre in your diet while you are recovering. Fresh fruit and vegetables will help to keep your bowels moving regularly.

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THINGS THAT WILL HELP YOU TO RECOVER MORE QUICKLY

Eat Healthily

Eating a healthy diet will help to ensure that your body has all the nutrients it needs to heal.

Stop Smoking

By not smoking - even if it's just for the time that you're recovering - you immediately start to improve your circulation and your breathing - not to mention a whole list of other benefits to the heart and lungs.

Family and Friends

Family and Friends can give you two important things:

- **Practical help** with the tasks you might be temporarily unable to do while you recover - such as driving, the weekly shop, or lifting heavier items.
- **Keeping Your Spirits Up** - the novelty soon wears off being home alone all day, and it's easy to feel isolated by this. Having company can help you to worry less. It's important not to let anxiety set in, as it can become a problem in itself which stands in the way of you getting back to your normal routine.

Keep A Routine

Get up at your normal time in the morning, get dressed, move about the house. If you get tired, you can rest later.

Build Up Gradually

Have a go at doing some of the things you'd normally do, but build up gradually. Some suggestions are included in the Recovery Tracker on pages 8-10. Obviously, everyone recovers at a different speed, so not all of the suggestions will be suitable for everybody.

When you're building up your activities, you may feel more tired than normal. If so, stop, and rest until your strength returns. If you feel pain, stop immediately and consult your GP or call NHS Direct.

Don't sleep in - you can always rest later. Staying in bed can cause depression.

If you live alone, and you do not have family or friends close by, organise support in advance - have family or friends come to stay with you for the first few days after surgery if possible.

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RETURNING TO WORK

Fact: Work can be part of your recovery

Everyone needs time off to recover after an operation - but too much of it can stand in the way of you getting back to normal. In fact, by staying off for too long, people can become isolated and depressed. Getting back to your normal work routine sooner rather than later can actually help you to recover more quickly.

Getting back to work

How quickly you return to work depends on a number of things:

- How you heal
- How you respond to surgery
- The type of job you do

People whose work involves a lot of heavy lifting, or standing up or walking for long periods of time, will not be able to return to work as quickly as those who have office jobs which are less demanding physically.

How soon can I go back?

Every person recovers differently and has different needs. In most cases it's usually safe to return to work 2 weeks after the operation. If your employer has an occupational health nurse or doctor they will advise you on this. Alternatively your GP can give you advice. Ultimately, it's your decision when you want to go back, and there's no insurance risk to your employer if you choose to do so.

You do not need your GP's permission to go back to work - this is ultimately your decision.

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Confidence

It will take you a little while to regain your full confidence when you go back to work. You may be slower than normal at first, so don't take on too much responsibility too soon. Don't be too hard on yourself about this - it's perfectly normal and you'll start to get back up to speed after a few days.

PLANNING FOR YOUR RETURN

Talk to your Occupational Health service or GP to work out when and how is best for you to return to work.

Depending on the nature of your job, you might want to ask your employer about returning to work on lighter duties at first. This means:

- Spending more time sitting rather than standing or walking
- Doing work that is mostly paperwork, using a computer or telephone
- Not carrying more than around 5kg any significant distance
- Avoiding tasks such as prolonged loading or unloading, packing or unpacking.

If you have an HR Department at work, they will be able to advise you on how your absence might affect any benefits you may be receiving during your time off.

3 Golden rules for a speedy recovery: • Stay active • Keep a normal daily routine • Keep social contact with people.

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DRIVING

Your insurance company should be informed about your operation. Some companies will not insure drivers for a number of weeks after surgery, so it's important to check what your policy says.

Driving - An exercise

Before resuming driving, you should be free from the sedative effects of any painkillers you may be taking. You should be comfortable in the driving position and able to safely control your car, including freely performing an emergency stop.

Practise the basic movements you need to drive safely. **Do this in a safe place without putting the key the ignition.** In particular, you should be able to easily turn your head to see around you. Reversing, as well as checking for blind spots whilst driving, both place a strain on your neck - it's important to avoid this while you are recovering. It is advisable not to restart driving with a long journey.

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RECOVERY TRACKER

Days Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
1-3 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Swelling and discomfort on your neck• Some difficulty swallowing solid foods• A small drain will be attached to your wound to prevent fluid building up• Your voice may be a little husky for the first few days.• You may feel groggy from the anaesthetic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You should be able to swallow fluids an hour or so after surgery.• At first, nursing staff will check your wound daily and clean it as necessary. Once the drains and clips have been removed, you will be able to bath or shower as normal.• After a day or two, you will probably be up and walking around the ward. You may be given some gentle neck exercises to do to prevent stiffness.• You will also have blood tests to test your levels of Thyroxine.• By day 3 or 4, the clips and drains will normally be removed.		No

A thyroid operation may temporarily affect the volume of your voice. This may be a factor to consider if your job places high demands on your speech, for example, if you are a teacher, or if you work in a call centre. It is also worth remembering that your speech may become fatigued as it is used during the day.

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RECOVERY TRACKER

Days Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
4-14 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most people will be well enough to go home after about 4 days.• Bruising and soreness around your wound will improve and you should be free of pain after about a week. You will be prescribed medication to relieve any pain.• You should expect to feel tired as your neck heals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get up, get dressed as normal, move about the house.• Continue with any exercises for your neck that have been recommended by your surgeon or nurses. Move your neck gently for the first week or so.• As the pain goes away, you can start to return to solid foods.• If you feel tired, rest until your strength returns.• Gradually build up the amount of activity you do each day.• Wash and shower as normal, keeping your wound clean.• Using an unscented moisturising cream such as E45 will help to keep the wound soft.• Massaging the scar will help it flatten. Use unscented sun block to cover up your scar, otherwise the new skin will tan a different shade to the rest of your skin.		Not just yet

Caring for your scar

Keep the wound soft using an unscented moisturising cream. Massaging the scar will help it flatten. Use unscented sun block to cover the scar, otherwise the new skin will tan a different shade to the rest of your skin.



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RECOVERY TRACKER

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
2-4 weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your neck should now be free of pain, and you can expect to be able to move it as normal.The scar may still have some redness but don't worry - this will fade over the coming months.Continue to massage and moisturise the scar.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Test your fitness to drive using the exercise on page 7.Most people find they are ready to return to work after about 2 weeks if they have a desk job that does not involve a lot of physical activity.For people whose jobs involve heavy lifting, or standing up for long periods (if you work in a shop, for example), it is sensible to wait for up to 4 weeks before returning to work.		Yes
6 weeks		<p>Around this time, you'll probably have an outpatients appointment for a blood test - to check the Thyroxine levels in your blood.</p> <p>If you haven't had any complications to do with your surgery, and you're still off work, it's possible that you're feeling anxious about returning to work and could do with a bit of help from your GP and your employer. Talk to them both about a gradual return to work.</p> <p>If you're off for too long, there's a risk of developing problems to do with anxiety, isolation, and lack of confidence. These could affect your quality of life in the long term. Talk to your doctor about how best to avoid this becoming a problem for you.</p>		Yes

When can I have sex?

For many people, being able to have sex again is an important milestone in their recovery. There are no set rules or times about when it's safe to do so other than whether it feels OK to you - treat it like any other physical activity and build up gradually.

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AFTER YOU GET HOME

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How many hours rest I needed:	What times I needed to rest:	Went to bed at ... pm	How's the feeling in your neck?	What solids did you manage to eat?	Emotional feelings?
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								

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AFTER YOU GET HOME

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How many hours rest I needed:	What times I needed to rest:	Went to bed at ... pm	How's the feeling in your neck?	What solids did you manage to eat?
8							
9							
10							
	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How much rest I needed after each:	Went to bed at ... pm	What do I want to achieve tomorrow?		
11							
12							
13							
14							

Remember, take a step-by-step approach to getting better, and build up your activities in small stages. Don't push yourself too far too fast. If you're concerned about anything, or if you feel you're not making progress fast enough, call your GP or NHS Direct on 0845 46 47

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KEEPING WELL

Because of your operation, the chances are you'll be a lot more aware of your body and how it works.

Right now is a really good time to build on the knowledge you've gained and make small changes to your lifestyle which can prevent you from experiencing certain health problems in the future. You can do this by:

- **Improving your diet** - get 5 portions of fresh fruit and veg per day.
- **Any exercise** – even if it's just a few short walks each day – really will make a difference to your health.
- **Quit Smoking** NHS Stop Smoking Services are one of the most effective ways to stop for good – and they're completely free. Your doctor will be happy to help you.

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Website Links

The internet's a great thing – anything you want to know is there for you at the click of a mouse... but, do be careful about the way you use it when it comes to getting information about your health. It's hard to know which sites to trust, and none of them can tell you anything that's specific to your individual medical needs.

If you do want to know more about your operation, recovery or return to work, here is a list of trusted websites that offer safe, sensible, useful information:

British Association of Otorhinolaryngologists (Head and Neck Surgeons)

www.entuk.org

British Thyroid Association

www.british-thyroid-association.org

British Thyroid Foundation

www.btf-thyroid.org

British Association of Endocrine and Thyroid Surgeons

www.baes.info

NHS Direct - 0845 46 47

www.btf-thyroid.org

Health and Wellbeing

<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HealthAndWellBeing/index.htm>

DVLA - Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

<http://www.dvla.gov.uk/media/pdf/medical/aagv1.pdf>

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