

How to Care for Yourself after Amputation (Above Knee or Below Knee)

What will my incision look like?

- You will have an incision with staples or sutures (stitches) at the site.
- Staples or sutures stay in place for 4-6 weeks, depending on how your incision is healing. At your first post-operative visit, your surgeon will check your incision to determine if they are ready to be removed.
- Your incision may feel thickened and raised. This is normal and will decrease over time (6- 12 months).

How do I take care of my incision?

- Keep your incisions clean and dry.
- Before you go home from the hospital, use a mirror to look at your incision on all sides. This will help you know if there are any changes when you check it at home.
- **Do not** put any creams, lotions, powders or ointments on your surgical incision unless told to do so by your provider.
- **Do not** shave the skin on your residual limb as this may cause irritation.
- Keep your incision away from sunlight for 6 months to promote optimal healing.
- Once your incision heals, you may be asked to do gentle massage to reduce scar tissue tightness.
- Wear your shrinker sock as directed to help reduce swelling in your residual limb. It also helps to shape the limb to fit your prosthetic. You will be fitted for a shrinker sock (compression stocking) while in the hospital or at a later time. Typically, the shrinker sock is applied on post-operative day 2 if your incision site looks good.

Follow these guidelines to care for your incision site while bathing

- Wash your incision daily with soap and water and pat dry, generally beginning 72 hours after surgery.
- Use a new freshly-laundered washcloth and towel each time you bathe.
- You may shower if you have been cleared by physical therapy and have the proper safety equipment in place.
- **Do not** soak in a bathtub or hot tub or swim in a pool or lake until cleared by your provider.

How do I position my residual limb?

- Remove the pillow from underneath your residual limb by noon on the day after your surgery and **do not** put it back.
- **Do not** prop your residual limb on pillow or blankets when you sit or lie down.
- Keep your residual limb straight and flat when you are sitting.

What can I do to help manage my pain or discomfort after surgery?

Experiencing pain after surgery is normal. Often your incision site is not the only area of discomfort. Please tell a member of your healthcare team about the pain you have, which can include:

- **Incision discomfort**-soreness, pain and swelling around the incision site
- **Phantom limb pain**- painful sensations that seem to be coming from the part of your limb that is no longer there.

What can I do to help keep my pain under control?

Your doctor will order effective medications to keep your post-surgical pain under control. Your nurse will ask you about your pain regularly throughout your recovery. You shouldn't hesitate to ask for pain medication if needed. If your stump pain increases significantly, please let your surgeon know.

Medications such as Neurontin® can help with phantom limb pain as well as non-medication therapies such as massage of the residual limb.

What exercises will I do after surgery?

Exercise is an important part of the recovery process after surgery. Below are activities you will be expected to perform during your hospital stay:

- **Deep breathing and coughing:**

Use your breathing machine (incentive spirometer) 10 times every hour while you are awake. For example, if you like to watch TV, you should be using your incentive spirometer 2-3 times during commercial breaks.

- **Sitting in the chair:**

Sit in the chair 3-4 times a day

- **Walking:**

Walking after surgery is one of the most important things you can do. As you become mobile again after surgery, a physical therapist will teach you how to use a walker to help you move around safely. They will use a **gait belt**, which is a long, thickly woven cotton strap with a non-slip buckle, around your waist to keep you steady and help prevent falls.

- **Repositioning:**

To prevent pressure injuries during your hospital stay, you need to change your body position. The following recommendations will help you reposition yourself:

- **While in bed:** turn your body at least every 2 hours from side to side.
- Keep the head of your bed at a 30-degree angle or lower to prevent too much pressure on your bones (hip when lying on side, tailbone when lying on your back).
- Place a pillow between your ankles and knees when lying on your side.
- Place a pillow under your lower legs to elevate the heels when lying on your back.
- **When sitting,** change your position every 15 minutes by tilting your body forward or to the side so that your bottom lifts off the seat.
- Stand up or do “pushups” by using arms to raise off the seat every hour.

What are my activity instructions for home?

After your surgery, you should gradually and consistently increase your physical activity. You may tire more easily than before surgery. This is normal. Your strength and energy level will increase as your body heals.

Restrictions

- **Do not** return to work until you have seen your doctor at the first follow up clinic visit.

Driving:

- Your doctor will discuss with you when you can drive again.
- Do not drive if you are still taking narcotic (opioid) pain medication or other medicines which make you less alert.
- You may need occupational therapy to assess your car, recommend equipment changes and train you before driving again .

Activities

- Exercise
 - Practice the physical therapy exercises and stretches prescribed by your physical therapist (See Above Knee/Below Knee Amputation Positioning and Exercise Program Handouts)
 - Do knee and hip joint range of motion (ROM) exercises at least 3 times daily.
- Plan rest periods throughout the day.

What steps should I take to monitor my health at home?

You will need to perform the following self-checks daily:

- Take your temperature each morning before eating, drinking and anytime you think you may have a fever.
- Use a small mirror to check your incision and residual limb daily for signs of **infection** including:
 - Increased redness
 - Warmth or drainage
 - Tenderness
 - Change in color
 - Increased swelling
- Check your remaining leg, foot or toes for any changes every day.

What type of follow-up care will I receive?

You will have a post-operative visit with your surgeon approximately 4- 6 weeks after your surgery. If you do not receive an appointment or need to change your appointment, please call **(888) 287-1082**.

Your first post-operative visit with a Physical Medicine and Rehab (PMR) doctor is 6 to 8 weeks after discharge (**after** you have seen your surgeon). The timing of this visit may depend on the healing of your incision.

You will need to call your Primary Care Physician (PCP) once you are discharged from the hospital to re-establish care. If you do not get your prosthesis care at Michigan Medicine, ask you PCP for a local referral.

When do I need to seek emergency care?

Call 9-1-1 immediately if:

If you have any of the following **symptoms of a stroke**:

- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding others
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, usually on one side of your body
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or loss of coordination
- Sudden or severe headache with no known cause

If you have any of the symptoms listed below:

- Sudden chest pain
- Shortness of breath not relieved by rest
- You believe you are experiencing a true emergency

When do I need to call my doctor?

Call the Vascular Surgery Clinic if you have any of the following signs and symptoms:

- Under the tongue temperature above 101.5° F (38.6° C).
 - Be sure to clean your thermometer with soap and water or rubbing alcohol after each use.

- Incision or wound has:
 - Excessive redness that goes beyond the incision
 - Bright red blood
 - Thick yellow or white (pus) drainage
 - Odor
 - Is warm/hot to touch
- Your pain is worse and your pain medicines are not controlling it.
- Any part of your operated limb becomes cold/painful
- Injury or trauma to your residual limb

What is the number to call?

- Call (888) 287-1082 Monday through Friday from 8:00am to 4:30pm:
 - Ask to speak to a Vascular Surgery Nurse.
- Call (734) 936-6267 after 4:30pm or on weekends or holidays:
 - Ask the hospital operator to page the Vascular Surgery Resident on call. You will receive a call back from the Resident.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by Michigan Medicine for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by Michigan Medicine and for which Michigan Medicine does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Reviewers: Bethany Lee-Lehner, RN, MSN
 Peter Henke, MD
 Monica Waidley, RN, BSN
 CVC Control #341

Patient Education by [Michigan Medicine](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last Revised 10/2020