

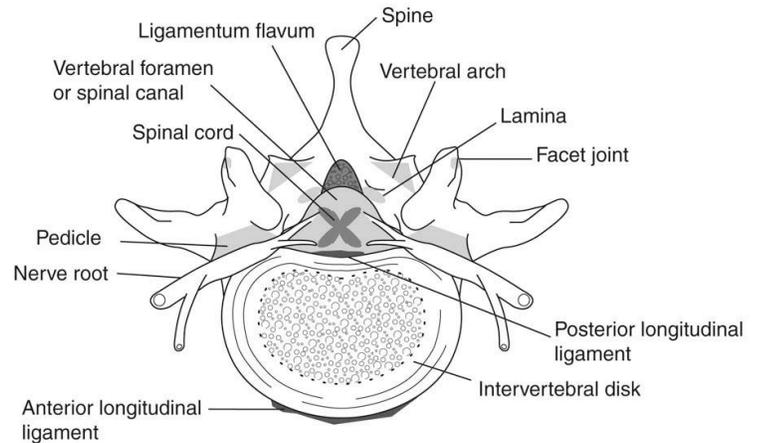


University of Michigan  
Health System

# How to Care for Yourself after Thoracic Decompression

## What is Thoracic Decompression?

Thoracic decompression is the removal of part or all of the bone that covers the back of the spinal column called the lamina, as well as removal of a portion of the rib on the affected side. The purpose of this surgery is to access the disc or bone that is causing pressure around the spinal cord or nerve(s).



Structures of the Spine

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## How long will I stay in the hospital?

Most patients stay in the hospital for 1-3 days. Before you can go home, you need to be able to:

Control your pain by taking oral pain medications

1. Get up and walk around on your own
2. Empty your bladder.

If you are unable to do these things or if you have any problems from your surgery, you may need to stay in the hospital longer.

## Which Activities should I avoid?

- Do not bend or twist your back repeatedly.
- Do not lift more than 5-10 pounds (about the weight of a gallon of milk).

Department of Neurosurgery  
734-936-7010

- If you go to pick something up and it causes strain to the back muscles, do not lift it.
- Remember to keep things close to your body if you do lift or carry anything, and use your knees if you bend instead of your back.
- Do not drive for at least two weeks because of your recent surgery. After the two weeks do not drive if you are taking prescription pain medications or a muscle relaxer. These medications can cause you to be drowsy. Once you are able to drive, make sure that you can safely look over your shoulders without causing any pain.
- Do not do any running/jogging, vacuuming, weight lifting, sweeping/mopping, laundry, shoveling/raking, riding a lawn mower, wave runner or anything that might irritate your back until you have completely healed from your surgery.
- You may have sexual activity when you are comfortable with it.
- Follow these activity limitations until your follow up appointment in 4-6 weeks.

### **How can I take care of myself at home?**

Please remember that it takes time for your muscles and nerves to heal. You may have complete relief of your pain immediately after your surgery, but that is **not** normal. Because it takes time for this healing process to occur, we ask that you not do too much to irritate your back.

- **Walk around your house at least every 1 ½-2 hours while you are awake, to stay as active as possible, keep the back muscles strong, and to help prevent blood clots in your legs.**
- Once you are comfortable with walking, you can gradually increase the amount or length of time that you do walk.
- Do not push yourself to do too much too soon. Increasing your pain may actually delay your recovery.

- Change your positions often. Avoid lying down, standing or sitting for long periods during the day.
- If you do any activity that increases your pain, you should stop it immediately.

### **Ice:**

It is important to ice your back in the beginning to help with some of the swelling that occurs from surgery.

- Place a towel over the surgical site to protect your skin, and then use a gel pack for 30 minutes, usually about 4 times per day.
- Do not leave the pack on longer than 30 minutes since it may actually increase your pain.
- A gel pack can be made by placing liquid dish soap in a freezer Ziploc® bag until it is ½ to 2/3's full. Place the bag flat on a freezer shelf to allow it to harden. It will form a gel that will conform to your body. It can be refrozen after you use it.
- **Make sure to ice for 30 minutes prior to getting your staples out**

### **Washing/wound care:**

It is important that you wash your surgical wounds at least once per day with soap and water, and pat it dry afterward.

- Do not be afraid of hurting the wound because of the soap and water. You should take showers, and not baths to do this.
- Do not keep the wound covered unless you have some drainage, and were instructed by our office to do so.

### **Which other signs and symptoms may I have?**

#### **Constipation:**

Decreased activity after surgery, along with your pain medications, may result in constipation. It is important that you move your bowels regularly. Fruits,

bran cereal, extra fluids or over the counter laxatives such as Miralax<sup>®</sup>, or Milk of Magnesia<sup>®</sup>, will help you to move your bowels regularly.

### **When should I call my doctor?**

Contact our office at the appropriate number listed below if you have any of the following signs and symptoms:

- New numbness or tingling in your feet or legs
- Increasing redness or swelling around your incision with or without any soreness
- The edges of your incision start coming apart.
- Drainage from your incision, especially if yellow/green and/or bad smelling.
- Fever over 101 F.
- Increase or sudden bruising around the incision that wasn't there before,
- Increasing pain that you cannot control.
- Any new numbness or tingling in your hands or fingers on either side.
- New weakness of your arm, hand or legs.

### **Phone lists of physician's administrative assistants:**

Dr. Frank La Marca- (734) 936-5024

Dr. Paul Park- (734) 615-2627

Dr. Juan Valdivia- (734) 936-5024

Dr. Steve Sullivan- (734) 936-5020

Dr. Lynda Yang- (734) 936-5017

Please call the above numbers and leave a message for any questions and prescription refills. Please call before 3:00pm in order for your questions to be answered. If you call after that time, your call may not be returned until the following business day.

If you have paperwork that needs to be filled out for disability, please allow at least 1 week for this to be done. We need a release of information from you in order to complete paperwork related to work or school. If we do not have a release of information, we cannot send the paperwork to your employer.

### **Prescription Refills:**

To refill a prescription that we have given you, call the number listed above for your doctor. **Please allow 48 hours for your prescription to be filled.**

Some medications (containing oxycodone or morphine) cannot be called in to a pharmacy. We can either fax over these prescriptions, or you may pick them up at our office. Please allow 4-7 days for the mail. We only provide pain medications for 3 months from the date of your surgery. If you need further pain medications after that time, contact your primary care doctor or your pain specialists.

### **Taking Medication Safely:**

Follow the dosing of your prescriptions carefully and do not take more medication than what your doctor ordered. Not following the dosing instruction can result in harm to your liver, kidneys, respiratory problems or overdose.

- Do not take any over the counter pain medications that contain acetaminophen (Tylenol®) with your prescriptions unless we otherwise instruct you to do so.
- You cannot take any prescription or over-the-counter medications such as, Advil®, Aleve®, Celebrex®, Mobic®, Relafen®, naproxen, ibuprofen or aspirin products, until cleared by us, because it can prevent healing from occurring.

Disclaimer: This document is for informational purposes only and is not intended to take the place of the care and attention of your personal physician or other professional medical services. Talk with your doctor if you have Questions about individual health concerns or specific treatment options.

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Author: Dori Danbury, PA ; Megan Curtis, NP  
Reviewers: Dorinda Nance, MS, CNS; Toni Szpara MSN(c)  
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