

Peripheral Nerve Surgery Discharge Instructions

Congratulations on completing your peripheral nerve surgery! These instructions will help guide your recovery at home. Please read them carefully and keep them for reference.

Understanding Your Recovery

Peripheral nerve surgery requires patience - **recovery often takes 12 months or longer** as nerves heal and regrow very slowly. Your surgery may have involved nerve decompression, nerve transfer, tumor removal, or brachial plexus repair.[\[1\]](#) Each type of surgery has a different recovery timeline, but all require careful attention to your rehabilitation program.

If you had a **nerve transfer**, you will need to relearn how to use your muscles in a new way - this does not happen naturally or automatically. Supervised therapy with a hand therapist or physical therapist who specializes in nerve injuries is essential for your recovery.[\[1\]](#)

Activity Guidelines

What You Can Do

- Start gentle movement of your arm or leg as directed by your surgeon
- Perform any exercises taught to you by your therapist exactly as instructed
- Gradually increase your daily activities as your strength improves
- Listen to your body and rest when you feel tired

What to Avoid

- Do not lift heavy objects until cleared by your surgeon
- Avoid activities that put excessive strain on the surgical area
- Do not perform repetitive motions that might stress the healing nerve
- Avoid contact sports or activities that could result in re-injury
- **If you had a nerve transfer, your limb was likely placed in a brace to avoid certain movements.** Strict adherence to movement restrictions is PARAMOUNT to a successful outcome, as ignoring these restrictions may cause the repaired or newly connected nerve(s) to rip and tear!

Splints and Braces

- **Keep your splint or brace clean and dry at all times**
- Wear your splint or brace exactly as directed by your surgeon
- Do not remove your splint or brace unless instructed to do so
- If your splint becomes wet, damaged, or uncomfortable, contact your surgeon's office
- Your therapist may adjust or modify your splint as your recovery progresses

Bathing and Showering

Before 48 Hours After Surgery:

- You may take sponge baths, keeping the surgical area completely dry
- Alternatively, you may shower with your surgical arm or leg covered with a waterproof umbrella bag or plastic covering
- Make sure the bag is sealed well to prevent water from reaching your incision or splint

After 48 Hours:

- You may shower and let water run gently over your incision
- Do not scrub the incision
- Pat the incision dry with a clean towel after showering
- **Keep your splint or brace dry** - remove it only if your surgeon has given you permission to do so for showering
- **Do not take baths, use hot tubs, or go swimming** until your surgeon says it is safe (usually 2-4 weeks)

Wound Care

If You Have Skin Glue:

- Your incision is closed with skin glue (also called surgical adhesive)
- The glue will peel off on its own in 7-14 days - do not pick at it

- You do not need to apply any ointments or creams to the incision
- Keep the area clean and dry between showers

If You Have Sutures or Staples:

- Your incision is closed with sutures (stitches) or staples
- Keep the area clean and dry between showers
- Do not apply any ointments or creams to the incision unless your surgeon tells you to
- Your sutures or staples will be removed at your follow-up appointment (usually around 2 weeks after surgery)
- It is normal to see some bruising or swelling around the incision

Medications

Pain Management

- Some pain and discomfort after surgery is normal and expected
- Take your pain medications exactly as prescribed
- Use ice packs on the surgical area for 15-20 minutes at a time to help reduce pain and swelling (make sure to protect your skin with a towel)

Other Prescribed Medications

- Take all medications exactly as prescribed by your surgeon
- Do not stop taking any medications without talking to your surgeon first
- Contact your surgeon if you experience side effects from any medications

When to Call Your Surgeon

Contact your surgeon's office right away if you notice:

- Increasing redness, warmth, or swelling around your incision[\[2\]](#)
- Drainage or fluid leaking from your incision[\[2\]](#)
- Fever over 101.5°F (38.6°C)

- Severe or worsening pain that is not controlled by your medications
- New numbness, tingling, or weakness (different from what you had before surgery)
- Changes in color or temperature of your fingers or toes
- Wound edges that are separating or opening
- Any concerns about your splint or brace

Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation

Therapy is essential for your recovery, especially if you had a nerve transfer or brachial plexus surgery. Your surgeon will refer you to a specialized hand therapist or physical therapist who has experience with nerve injuries.[\[1\]](#)[\[3\]](#)

What to Expect from Therapy:

- Therapy may begin within the first few weeks after surgery, depending on your procedure[\[3\]](#)
- Your therapist will teach you specific exercises to help you relearn how to use your muscles[\[1\]](#)
- You will need to practice your exercises daily at home
- Recovery is slow - you may not see improvement for several months as the nerve regrows[\[1\]](#)
- Your therapist will work closely with your surgeon to adjust your program as you heal[\[1\]](#)

Important Points About Nerve Recovery:

- Nerves regrow very slowly - typically about 1 inch per month
- You may experience tingling sensations (called "Tinel's sign") as the nerve heals
- Muscle strength returns gradually after the nerve reaches the muscle
- Fatigue is common in recovering muscles - do not overwork them[\[1\]](#)
- Be patient and consistent with your therapy program

Follow-Up Appointment

You have a follow-up appointment scheduled for approximately 2 weeks after surgery. Please call the office if you did not receive an appointment time or need to reschedule.

At this visit, your surgeon will:

- Check your incision healing
- Remove sutures or staples if you have them
- Assess your early recovery progress
- Adjust your activity restrictions and therapy program
- Answer any questions you have

You will need regular follow-up appointments for many months as your nerve heals and your function improves. Keep all scheduled appointments.

Important Reminders

- **Do not smoke** - smoking significantly slows nerve healing and reduces your chances of a good recovery[\[4\]](#)
- Maintain a healthy diet with adequate protein to support nerve healing
- Get plenty of rest, but stay as active as your surgeon allows
- Be patient with your recovery - nerve healing takes many months to over a year[\[1\]\[5\]](#)
- Stay positive and committed to your therapy program
- Communicate regularly with both your surgeon and your therapist about your progress

What to Expect During Recovery

- **Most complications occur within the first 1-2 weeks after surgery**, with wound-related problems being the most common[\[2\]](#)
- The total recovery process often requires more than one operation and long, intensive rehabilitation[\[6\]](#)
- With a motivated patient and a dedicated surgical and therapy team, the outlook for functional recovery is good[\[6\]](#)
- Many patients are able to return to productive and satisfying lives after peripheral nerve surgery[\[6\]](#)

If you have any questions or concerns about your recovery, please contact Dr. Foster's office at Olympia Orthopaedic Associates.

References

1. [Key Considerations for Nerve Transfer Rehabilitation After Surgical Reconstruction for Brachial Plexus and Peripheral Nerve Injuries.](#) Kahn LC, Stonner MM, Dy CJ. The Journal of Hand Surgery. 2024;49(2):160-168. doi:10.1016/j.jhsa.2023.09.016.
2. [A Nationwide Analysis of 30-Day Adverse Events, Unplanned Readmission, and Length of Hospital Stay After Peripheral Nerve Surgery in Extremities and the Brachial Plexus.](#) Martin E, Muskens IS, Senders JT, et al. Microsurgery. 2019;39(2):115-123. doi:10.1002/micr.30330.
3. [Review of Rehabilitation Protocols for Brachial Plexus Injury.](#) Li H, Chen J, Wang J, Zhang T, Chen Z. Frontiers in Neurology. 2023;14:1084223. doi:10.3389/fneur.2023.1084223.
4. [Adult Peripheral Nerve Disorders: Nerve Entrapment, Repair, Transfer, and Brachial Plexus Disorders.](#) Fox IK, Mackinnon SE. Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. 2011;127(5):105e-118e. doi:10.1097/PRS.0b013e31820cf556.
5. [Management of Adult Brachial Plexus Injuries.](#) Hill JR, Lanier ST, Brogan DM, Dy CJ. The Journal of Hand Surgery. 2021;46(9):778-788. doi:10.1016/j.jhsa.2021.05.008.
6. [Brachial Plexus Injuries.](#) Tung TH, Mackinnon SE. Clinics in Plastic Surgery. 2003;30(2):269-87. doi:10.1016/s0094-1298(02)00094-9.