

Exercises after low back surgery

Information for patients

This document is a guide to help you improve your flexibility, strength and confidence after surgery. It is broken into three stages with suggested timelines alongside the information. This is a guide only and you may find that you move through the stages more quickly or slowly.

****If you can complete the exercise in a stage easily, you can progress to the next stage. If you experience any new or increased pain which is impacting your function then you may wish to move back a stage until you feel more comfortable.****

What you can do after your spinal operation

You may have heard that after a spinal operation you should avoid certain positions or activities in case of doing damage to your back. This is no longer the case. Current evidence suggests that lifting, bending and being active is safe and can help you improve quicker.

We recommend you gradually increase what you are doing. Your back will be sensitive as you have had an operation, so at times your pain may increase but this does not mean that there is anything wrong.

Remember, it is safe to:

- lift
- bend, twist and move
- sit for as long as you like.

You may notice that if you sit for a long period of time your back stiffens up and feels painful. We encourage you to move regularly to help you feel more comfortable.

Rehabilitation stages

Stages of rehab	Weeks since operation	Rehabilitation plan	Walking
1	0 to 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently take your pain medication • Complete stage one exercises two times a day • Complete balance exercises daily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aim to get out of bed and walk to the toilet as soon as possible after your surgery • Start to walk short distances daily • Set a realistic target and gradually increase
2	2 to 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once your pain has begun to settle, start the exercises labelled stage two • Complete two to three times a week • Complete balance exercises daily • Start to return to usual activities including work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walk daily • Try progressing by walking further and/or faster
3	6 to 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once you are feeling confident with stage two exercises then progress onto stage three • Complete two to three times a week • Complete balance exercises daily • Continue to increase your usual activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walk daily • Try progressing by walking further and/or faster

Stage one exercises: complete twice daily

In this first stage it is important to remember that it is normal for your back to be sore. This initial pain can last for around two weeks. This stage is aimed at gently getting your back moving. Choose some or all of the following exercises

Top tip: It is very common for people to hold their breath during exercise, but it is better to try and breathe normally throughout.

Exercise one: knee rolls



- Lie on your back on either a bed, sofa or floor with your knees bent.
- Slowly move your knees from side to side.
- Go as far as feels comfortable.
- Repeat this as many times as comfortable.

- Aim for 15 to 30 repetitions.

Exercise two: pelvic tilts



- Lie on your back on either a bed, sofa or floor with your knees bent.
- Slowly tip your pelvis back to flatten your back then tilt your pelvis forward to arch your back.
- Repeat this movement as many times as feels comfortable.

- Aim for 15 to 30 repetitions.

Exercise three: seated stretches



- Sit on a chair, slowly slide your hands down your shin as far as is comfortable. You may have your knees together or your legs apart, whichever you prefer.
- Stay leaning forwards for 2 to 3 seconds.
- Slowly return to a sitting position and sit up as tall as you can. If you can, reach up to the ceiling or put your hands behind your back and lift your chest.
- Repeat this movement as many times as feels comfortable.

- Aim for 15 to 30 repetitions.

Stage one balance – standing with feet together



- Stand next to a chair or work surface that you can hold onto if you need support.
- Bring your feet together as shown, if you need to, hold on when bringing your feet together.
- Once you have your balance, let go of the surface and try to hold this position.
- Aim to hold for 15 to 30 seconds.

- Repeat 4 times.
- Complete at least once daily.
- For balance exercises to work they should make you wobble. If you find this too easy, move onto the balance exercise in stage two.

Stage two exercises: complete two to three times a week

In stage two your pain should have begun to settle down. However, it is normal to have some pain. In stage two we aim to improve your strength. It's a good idea to continue with stage one exercises throughout. Choose at least two exercises from below, if you wish you can do all of them.

Top tip: managing setbacks

It is very common to have 'good' and 'bad' days during your recovery period. These bumps in the road are common and nothing to worry about. If at any point you feel your pain has flared up then return to completing one or two exercises from stage one. Once your pain has started to settle restart stage two exercises.

Exercise one: sit to stand



- Start by sitting in a chair.
- Stand up and sit down without using your arms.
- You may need to use your arms initially to help but as you improve, aim to use them less.
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- Repeat this until your legs feel tired or for up to two minutes.



Exercise two: bridging



- Lie on your back with your knees bent and your arms by your side.
- Press through your heels and lift your hips up. Go as far as feels comfortable.
- Hold at the top for one to two seconds then slowly lower your body down.
- Repeat this until you feel your legs start to ache or tire.
- Progression: aim to be complete this for two minutes.

Exercise three: step-ups



- Step up onto a step one foot at a time, and then step back down again.
- Hold onto something lightly for balance if required.
- Repeat this until you feel your legs start to ache or tire.
- Aim for one minute leading with each leg.
- Progression: Aim to complete for two minutes per leg.

Exercise four: wall press-ups



- Place your hands at shoulder height on a wall.
- Take a large step away from the wall.
- Bend your arms and slowly lower yourself towards the wall.
- Then push yourself back up to the starting position.
- Try to keep your body straight.
- Repeat this until your arms start to ache or tire.
- Aim to complete for one minute.



- To make it easier have your feet closer to the wall.
- To make it harder move your feet further away from the wall or stand on one leg.
- Progression: aim to complete for two minutes.

Stage two balance

For balance exercises to work they should make you wobble. If you find them easy, move onto the next position or to stage three.



Modified (semi) tandem stance

- Stand next to a chair or work surface that you can hold onto if you need support
- Bring your feet together as shown, if you need to, hold on when bringing your feet together
- Once you have your balance, let go of the surface and hold this position
- Aim to hold the position for 15 to 30 seconds

- Repeat four times
- Complete at least once daily.

- If you find this easy, try the tandem stance below



Tandem stance

- Place one foot in front of the other so your heel is touching the toes of your other foot.
- Hold onto a surface if you need to.
- Once you have your balance, let go of the surface and hold this position.
- Aim to hold this for 15 to 30 seconds.

- Repeat this four times
- Complete at least once daily
- Progression: do this exercise with your eyes closed

Don't forget

Aim to increase the distance or time you are walking each day. A little a day can help progress your walking

Stage three exercises: complete two to three times a week.

This stage is aimed at continuing to improve your strength, increase your confidence and help you return to the activities that are important to you. We encourage you to start to return to your usual household, work and leisure activities. It's common to still have soreness in your back at this stage. Choose at least two exercises from below (you can do all of them if you wish).

Exercise one: Weighted step-ups



- Hold onto a weight or a can or water bottle, if you prefer you can wear a backpack with a few cans or books inside (1 to 3kg weight).
- Step up onto the step one foot at a time, and back down again.
- Hold on lightly to a surface for balance if needed.
- Repeat this until you feel your legs start to ache or tire.
- Aim for one minute leading with each leg.
- Progression: aim to complete for two minutes per leg and/or increase the weight.

Exercise two: Weighted sit to stand



- Start by sitting in a chair.
- Stand up and sit down while holding onto weights, you can use cans, books or water bottles (1 to 3kg weight).
- Repeat this until you feel your legs start to ache or tire.
- Progression: aim to complete this for up to two minutes and/or increase the weight.



Exercise three: Single leg wall press-ups



- Place your hands at shoulder height on a wall.
- Take a large step away from the wall.
- Raise one foot off the floor.
- Bend your arms and slowly lower yourself towards the wall.
- Push yourself back up to standing.
- Repeat this until you feel your arms start to ache or tire.
- Aim to complete for one minute.
- Progression: aim to complete for two minutes.

Exercise four: bridging



- Lie on your back with your knees bent.
- Press through your heels and lift your hips up as high as you can.
- Hold at the top for five seconds then slowly lower your body down.
- Repeat this until you feel your legs start to ache or tire.
- Progression: perform this exercise with your arms folded across your chest or keep one leg raised off the floor and repeat, switch sides once you feel tired.

Stage three balance – single leg stand



- Stand next to a surface or hold onto the back of a chair.
- Lift one foot off the ground, aiming to hold this position.
- Hold onto a surface if you need to.
- Once you have your balance, let go of the surface and hold this position.
- Aim to hold this for 15 to 30 seconds.
- Repeat this four times.
- Complete at least once daily.

- Progression: do this exercise with your eyes closed or throw and catch a ball.

Don't forget

Keep aiming to increase the distance or time you are walking for each day.

You should be aiming for an intensity which makes you feel warm and slightly out of breath but still able to talk.

National guidelines recommend you should be performing 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week. Walking at this pace counts as moderate exercise and will help you meet this recommendation.

Useful contact details

Ward physiotherapists

Tel: 020 3299 2724, Monday to Friday, 08:30 to 16:00

ERAS Spine Nurse Specialists

Tel: 020 3299 5877 or 020 3299 9416, Monday to Friday, 08:00 to 16:00

Email: kch-tr.spineeras@nhs.net

Spine Nurse Specialist

Tel: 020 3299 8350 or 020 3299 8380, Monday to Friday, 09:00 to 16:00

Email: kch-tr.spinalnurses-kings@nhs.net

Sharing your information

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit www.kch.nhs.uk.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams. The PALS office is located on the ground floor of the Hambleden Wing, near the main entrance on Bessemer Road - staff will be happy to direct you.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net