

Email to Julie Silver



# Why Prehab Beats Rehab

Want to do well after an operation? Focus on what you do before.

**ONCE YOU'VE** gone through surgery, you probably expect a few things from your doctor: a rundown on how it went, a prescription for pain meds, and a rehabilitation program to get you back on your feet. But while a post-op regimen helps, evidence suggests that the more you do to prep your body *before* heading into the operating room, the better off you may be. So-called prehabilitation has been used extensively in orthopedic surgery, and now scientists are finding that it can help with other procedures, including those for treating cancer. In one recent study, researchers at McGill University assigned 77 patients scheduled for colorectal cancer surgery to two groups: a prehab group that exercised, ate well, and practiced relaxation techniques for about a month, and a rehab group that didn't start the wellness routine until post-op. Two months after the operation, everyone took a six-minute walking test. The results were striking. The prehab group was able to walk an average of 26 yards farther than they could a month before surgery, while rehab-only patients walked 24 yards less. "Surgery is a major event—think of it as a marathon," says study coauthor Francesco Carli, MD. "And leading up to any major event, you need to prepare." Use this pre-op routine to bounce back faster.

## GET MOVING

The last thing you might want to do before a trip to the hospital is hit the gym, but go anyway. A study in the journal *Arthritis & Rheumatism* found that patients who underwent knee or hip replacements were more mobile three days after surgery if they'd been physically active in the six weeks before. In fact, they were 73 percent less likely to need any inpatient rehab at all. Their regimen: Patients exercised for 30 to 60 minutes three times a week, starting with no-impact exercises in a pool, then working up to a stationary bike or an elliptical machine coupled with strength training and stretching.

## EAT MORE PROTEIN

A basic building block for muscles and other tissue, protein is crucial during the prep phase. In Carli's study, patients took a daily whey protein supplement. "It's best to take it soon after a workout," he says. "We know from sports medicine that if you consume 10 to 20 grams of protein within two hours of exercising, you will build lean muscle mass." That increased muscle may be one reason Carli's prehab group walked farther postsurgery.

## STOP SMOKING

If you light up regularly, you could be wreaking havoc on your recovery, delaying the healing process and increasing the risk of complications. But quitting—even just a month before surgery—can help. One 2011 report revealed that smokers who quit at least four weeks before their operation reduced their risk of respiratory problems by 23 percent.

## DEVELOP A STRESS REDUCTION ROUTINE

"Some people are in denial about how much even a small operation can affect their mood," says Carli. "Patients who are anxious or depressed often report greater pain after surgery and are more likely to experience complications." In his study, subjects met with a psychologist to learn deep breathing and guided visualization strategies, which they continued at home two or three times a week. "You can't separate the body and mind," says Carli. "Tending to your psychological health is as important as the physical prep." —SUNNY SEA GOLD