

The Washington Post March 23 2015

Want to bounce back fast from surgery? Here's what you can do.

Many people enter rehab programs after surgery to help them recover more easily. But improving your physical and emotional health beforehand may get you out of the hospital faster, reduce complication risks and speed healing.

“The idea is you build up your reserves, like an athlete training for a marathon,” says Francesco Carli, a professor of anesthesia at Montreal’s McGill University Health Centre.

“Prehabilitation,” or prehab, has been used for years by orthopedic surgeons. Now it’s catching on in heart surgery and cancer treatment.

For example, Carli found that 84 percent of colorectal cancer patients who did a month of aerobic, resistance and relaxation exercises and nutritional counseling prior to surgery recovered faster than other patients. A British study found that cycling for six weeks helped those who underwent chemo better withstand surgery afterward.

If you’re scheduled for surgery, ask your doctor about prehab programs or useful referrals such as physical therapy or nutritional counseling. Or run the steps below past your doctor. Experts say such strategies may boost your chances for better recovery.

Do breathing exercises.

Respiratory muscle-strengthening exercises after surgery lower risks of pneumonia and fever. Doing them in advance gives you a head start.

Massachusetts physiatrist Julie Silver, who developed a prehab program for cancer patients, suggests: Inhale through your nose for three seconds, mouth closed. Hold the breath for three seconds, then exhale through pursed lips for three seconds. Do that five times. Repeat the exercise three to four times daily.

Reduce stress.

A 2012 study in the journal *Brain, Behavior and Immunity* found that relaxation exercises and guided imagery for three days before and seven days after surgery helped people heal faster. “Reducing stress can also help you manage pain, and improve sleep and mood,” Silver says. Try gentle yoga stretches; taking slow, deep breaths; or meditation. Get free meditations [here](#).

Pay attention to protein.

A well-balanced diet promotes healing and helps fight infection, says Thomas K. Varghese, medical director of Strong for Surgery, a program that operates in Washington state. Protein may be key before cancer surgery: For example, studies have found that bladder cancer patients who are protein-deficient have elevated risk of a post-op complication.

Kick butts.

If you can't quit smoking, scale back two weeks before surgery. Smoking slows wound healing and “puts you at higher risk for infection,” says Rick Greene, surgical oncologist at the Levine Cancer Institute in Charlotte.

Check your meds.

Ask your doctor whether and when to stop taking drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen, which can increase bleeding risks. Ask about supplements such as vitamin E as well. Strong for Surgery advises people to stop echinacea, garlic,

ginkgo, ginseng, kava, saw palmetto, St. John's wort and valerian at least two weeks before surgery.

Up your exercise.

Aerobic exercise strengthens lungs and improves circulation, a plus for wound healing. "Any amount before surgery, provided it's more than usual, helps," Varghese says. (Just get your doctor's approval.) Ask about surgery-specific moves, such as stretches to improve shoulder range of motion for women having breast cancer surgery.

Copyright 2015. Consumers Union of United States Inc.