

Spine Care Companion: Module 6

Once I start feeling better, can I avoid spine problems in the future?

This handout is for patients with ongoing neck or back pain. It reviews how to know when it is safe to resume regular activities, what activities to avoid, spine strengthening, and maintenance care.

Is it safe to resume my normal activities now?

The goal of all rehabilitation (rehab) programs is to help you stay active. Most people can return to their normal day-to-day activities relatively soon with guidance from their rehab team.

There are steps you can take to reduce your chances of experiencing severe or incapacitating episodes of pain in the future.

Planning

It is important to remember the phrase, “stop and plan.” To limit risk, take a pause and plan how you will move or do a task before doing it. This could be anything from using proper form to do a single bend and lift to considering your mobility when planning a big home project.

Think about what movements or activities led to your original injury and plan how you could do these differently. As you recover, do not be afraid to be physically active. However, you need to make responsible choices when it comes to physical activity.

Breaking up Activities

Break your activities into shorter periods of time and smaller loads. Be willing to make more frequent trips. If possible, do not sit for more than 30 minutes at a time. Do frequent self-checks of your posture. Ask for help whenever possible, especially for heavy or awkward jobs.

Staying committed to your long-term exercise program will increase your chances of returning to normal activities.

Are there activities I should avoid?

It is reasonable to have the goal of returning to your normal activities. If your life involves doing heavy and vigorous activities for work or recreation, you will need a plan to stay strong and flexible. Talk with your rehab team to develop a plan to do your activities safely.

Once you have recovered, you do not need to be fearful of starting your normal activities again. Fear tends to make the body tight and unsteady, which puts you at risk for injury. Be sure your rehab plan included “test runs” of the activities you wish to resume.

You may have physical limitations due to your condition. You may also have concerns about your safety. Because each situation is unique, please discuss your goals and concerns with your care team. Making decisions with your care team ensures your plan is specific to your individual needs and long-term wellbeing.

What are some good spine strengthening programs?

Spine strengthening exercises are an important part of the path to overall good health. Core exercises are a key part of strengthening the spine and helping to prevent pain.

Your *core* includes the muscles of your entire torso from your upper back to pelvic region. Many muscles make up the core. The key is having those muscles work together. This will maximize your strength and make your movements efficient. Your core acts as a natural brace when you exert yourself.

As many athletes are aware, a strong core not only helps prevent injury, it also improves performance. In addition to preventing injury, your stronger core will allow you to enjoy activities and perform better.

Through your rehab program, your PT or chiropractor will teach you how to activate the different muscles of your core. Your strengthening program will include a mix of exercises to train these different muscles.

When starting any exercise routine, start slow and build as you become stronger. Remember, recovery is not a race. Recovery is a journey.

Should I continue with maintenance care?

Most people participate in an active exercise program to maintain and even improve their strength. Regular exercise can even reduce the risk of future pain. Activities like yoga, tai chi, and Pilates can be very effective in managing pain. Guidance on starting many of these activities is available for free online. If any exercises cause pain, talk to your PT or chiropractor about modifications.

Walking is free and is good for your body and mental health. However, walking may be difficult if you have *spinal stenosis* (narrowing of the nerve canal). A stationary bicycle may be an alternative exercise option, as long as your back can stay in a neutral posture. Biking is a

great form of *low-impact exercise*, meaning it does not put too much force on your joints or muscles.

Make decisions about continuing passive treatments such as chiropractic, massage, or acupuncture based on whether they continue to benefit you. You may want to continue these treatments if they are helping you work toward specific activity goals. Discuss your desires and goals with your spine care team.

It has been difficult handling the ups and downs after recovery. Is it time to go back to my provider?

During your recovery and even after you are mostly recovered, your spinal pain can fluctuate. Sometimes increased pain is a sign that your muscles are *fatigued* (tired). Regardless of what is triggering your symptoms, remember that each flare-up will not be permanent. It is very likely that you will continue to improve.

After a flare-up, most of your pain will usually improve in a few days to a couple of weeks. Although you have tools to manage pain, always reach out to your spine care team if you have questions or need help.

If you experience new or recurring pain or numbness in your arm or leg, talk to your care team about those symptoms.

Managing Stress

You may find that your symptoms worsen during times of stress. It is common for pain to increase when life is more stressful. Typically, this is because stress causes increased tension and fatigue. Stress can cause people to stop their exercise, stretching, and relaxation routines and can cause muscle tension.

When experiencing life stress, consider what can help you during these difficult times. Mindfulness activities, meditation, and relaxation techniques may all help. If these are not working, consider seeking out a clinical psychologist or other mental health provider who can help you find coping strategies that may work better for you.

Conclusion

We hope you have enjoyed these education modules and learned skills to manage your pain. As mentioned in the introduction, everyone's experience with back or neck pain is different. You may find that going back to read previous education modules is helpful as you progress. Remember that your spine team at UW Medicine is here to support you at all stages of your recovery.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.