

## Cervical Spine Surgery PT Protocols

### Phase 1: Initial Post-Op (0-4 weeks)

- Focus: pain control, wound healing, and regaining mobility
- Activities:
  - Walking - gradually increase walking duration and frequency, goal is walking 2-3 hours per day to help regain mobility, prevent stiffness, and prevent blood clots
  - Breathing exercises - practice taking deep breaths with the incentive spirometer to improve lung capacity, reduce pain, and prevent pneumonia
  - Gentle stretching and home exercises - early activity after surgery is important to improve overall recovery
    - Move your hands, wrists, elbows, and shoulders at least 2x per hour. Ideally you raise your hands above your head during each one of these periods, which should only take a minute or two.
    - Begin neck exercises on the second post-operative day and continue for one month after surgery. Remember to always keep your **HEAD UP**. Twice a day for 5 minutes with the cervical collar off, perform circles, then figure 8s, then ABCs.
- Restrictions:
  - Do NOT start formal physical therapy or exercise programs unless discussed with your surgeon
  - DO NOT lift more than 10 pounds. Avoid bending, twisting, or repetitive motions. Avoid running and jumping. Avoid doing any single activity (including sitting, standing, or walking) for greater than 30-45 minutes while awake during the first 4 weeks after surgery.
  - You are not permitted to drive until after your 2-week post-operative visit. You must be off of all narcotic pain medication and out of a cervical collar before you are cleared to drive. You will also need to have regained almost all of your motion and be able to quickly look over your shoulder and apply the brake and gas pedals as needed. You are allowed to ride in a car as a passenger during this time.
  - You are not permitted to fly until 4 weeks after surgery unless specifically discussed with your surgeon.
  - No hot tubs, baths, pools, or soaking the incision until 6 weeks after surgery.
- Bracing:
  - If you were given a hard cervical collar, you may only remove the brace to change the pads after hygiene. You must sleep and shower in the brace. Your nurse will instruct you how to change the pads after showering.
  - If you were given a soft cervical collar, you may remove it to eat and shower. Remember to keep your **HEAD UP** and avoid letting your chin fall to your chest. Sleep in the collar for the first two weeks and then as needed for comfort.

### Phase 2: Intermediate Recovery (4-12 weeks)

- Focus: building strength, improving flexibility, and returning to daily activities

- Activities:
  - Walking - keep walking for 2-3 hours a day, ideally multiple times a day to help build muscle and improve cardiovascular function
  - Physical therapy - some patients may need formal physical therapy to work on range of motion, strength, and pain control if they are not satisfied with their recovery after home exercises and walking alone. This will be discussed with the surgeon at the 6 week visit.
- Restrictions:
  - DO NOT lift more than 10 pounds until cleared by your surgeon. Avoid bending, twisting, or repetitive motions.
  - Many of your lifting restrictions will be lifted after your 6 week post-operative visit. The surgeon must evaluate you in person and review imaging prior to lifting restrictions. Once restrictions are lifted, patients should gradually return to normal activities. Running and jumping should be avoided until 8 weeks after surgery.
  - Formal physical therapy and exercise programs may be recommended at the 6 week post-operative visit, though many patients will do well with the home exercise program and may not require formal therapy.
  - No hot tubs, baths, pools, or soaking the incision until 6 weeks after surgery.
  - Many patients will return to driving within 4-12 weeks. This must be discussed with your surgeon. You may not drive until you are out of a cervical collar, off of all narcotics, have regained most of the range of motion in your neck, and feel comfortable quickly looking over your shoulder and applying the brake and gas pedals as needed. It is recommended that you practice in a controlled environment such as an empty parking lot prior to driving on the road.
- Bracing:
  - If you were given a hard cervical collar, this will typically be worn for 6 weeks after surgery. This will be discussed on a case by case basis with your surgeon.
  - If you were given a soft cervical collar, this can be worn for comfort after the first two weeks. Remember to keep your HEAD UP when not wearing the cervical collar. Most patients will wean use of the collar over the first 6 weeks.

### Phase 3: Advanced Recovery (12+ weeks)

- Focus: Returning to pre-surgery function and activities
- Activities:
  - Progressive Strengthening - continue strengthening exercises as needed
  - Return to Sport - after progressing through more advanced sport specific exercises patients may return to sport without restriction. This will be assessed with physical therapists and athletic trainers.
- Restrictions:
  - Full activity without restrictions
  - Return to sport