Thoracic Surgery

Definitions

THORACOTOMY-
Making an opening into the chest between the ribs. The skin incision may start under your arm and extend around to the back for 8 or 10 inches. For smaller operations, such as a biopsy, the incision may be only 3 inches in length.

BIOPSY-
Removal of a small piece of tissue to determine that nature of your disease. This may be done with a wedge resection of the lung, or sampling a lymph node or abnormal tissue from inside the chest.

MASS-
A lump or grouping of similar cells which are different from the surrounding tissue.

NODULE-
A small mass of rounded or irregular shape.

TUMOR-
An abnormal mass of tissue.

WEDGE RESECTION-
Removal of a “pie-shaped” portion of one lobe of lung.

LOBECTOMY-
Removal of a section or sections of the lung. Each lung is divided into lobes. The left lung has two lobes (upper and lower). The right lung has three lobes (upper, middle, lower). After a lobectomy, the remaining lobe(s) will fill the space.

PNEUMONECTOMY-
Removal of the entire lung (left or right). After a pneumonectomy, the remaining space (pleural cavity) fills with fluid.
Frequently Asked Questions & Discharge Information
After Your Thoracotomy

How long will I have discomfort?
The severity of post-operative pain gradually diminishes. By ten to twelve weeks after surgery, most patients experience only minimal discomfort.

Why do I hurt in front when my incision is in the back?
In order to enter the chest, the surgeon must spread your ribs apart. This is done for open thoracotomy incisions only. The nerve that runs under this rib is stretched, and this nerve gives feeling in the front of the chest. The pain you feel in front of your chest is from your incision and is called incisional (or referred) pain. This same nerve can also be irritated from the scope (done with thorascopic procedures) or instruments and cause the same pain even when the ribs are not spread.

What about healing of the incisions?
Complete healing takes time. When you are discharged, the area around the incision may be quite swollen. The swelling will gradually decrease. Sensation (feeling) directly along the incision is often decreased, but will return.

Is fever common?
A temperature of about 99 degrees is not uncommon after surgery. Patients notice that their temperature tends to be slightly higher in the later afternoon or evening. Doing deep breathing and coughing exercises will help control your temperature. If you have a fever of 101 degrees or more, call the doctor’s office immediately.

Is it normal to be short of breath?
You may experience some shortness of breath with activity or when you are fatigued. The brain may interpret chest discomfort as a feeling of “shortened breath”, even though the oxygen level and ability to breathe are normal. Over the next few weeks, as you gain strength, this should slowly, but steadily improve. If, however, you also have a fever, call the doctor’s office.

What about infection?
If you are worried about the way your incision is healing, please call the doctor’s office. You should report: fever greater than 101 degrees, redness or increasing tenderness along the incision, or excessive drainage form the wound accompanied by fever.

What can be done to speed recovery?
Continue your deep breathing and coughing exercises at home, and steadily increase your activity.
Frequently Asked Questions & Discharge Information
After Your Lung Surgery (continued)

What medications should be taken?
At the time of discharge, discuss with the doctor any medications you may have been on prior to surgery which have not been resumed. You will also be given a prescription for pain medication.

When is it safe to drive a car?
You may drive a car when you are no longer taking narcotic pain medication.

When will I see the doctor?
Your first postoperative check up will be scheduled about two to four weeks after your discharge. After that you will be followed on a regular basis dependent on your diagnosis.

When can I go back to work?
If your job requires heavy lifting, you will need to be off work for at least three months from the date of surgery. However, if your job is less strenuous, you may be able to go back to work in about six to eight weeks. This can be discussed with the doctor at your office visit.

What about weakness and fatigue?
You have had a major operation and fatigue is to be expected. Young or old, it takes time to recover from surgery of this kind. Although you may think that your weakness is a result of your surgery, it is also largely due to muscles being out of condition. It is estimated that a college student loses 15% of his or her muscle strength after only one week of bed rest. Therefore, it is not surprising that a patient who has been hospitalized and has undergone chest surgery feels weak or tired easily in the first few weeks at home. To regain strength you must exercise daily. Do not allow yourself to be inactive.