Thoracic Surgery
After Your Hiatal Hernia Surgery
Patient Education – Discharge Information

YOUR RECOVERY

COMFORT -
You will be given a prescription for pain medicine at the time of your discharge from the hospital. Initially, you may need to take the medication four or five times a day. Gradually, you will be able to decrease the amount of medication you require. If you find that you are almost out of pain medication and think you may need a refill, call the office. Be sure to call before you are completely out of pills. Some medications require a written prescription to be refilled. These cannot be telephoned to your local pharmacy.

If you are experiencing a lot of discomfort, try taking a warm shower. The warmth will relax the muscles.

After this type of surgery, most people experience some discomfort for three to six months. However, during this time the discomfort decreases in severity and intensity. After a few weeks you should be able to limit your prescription pain medication to only once or twice a day. Patients have reported that taking the medication early in the day and/or at bedtime seems to work best.

BREATHING EXERCISES -
We recommend that you continue to use your spirometer at least four times a day until you are back to your normal activity pattern. The deep breathing improves lung function and helps prevent postoperative complications with lung congestion.

APPETITE -
You will very likely experience a loss of appetite during the first few weeks. This is not abnormal, but to heal, you must eat. Try small, frequent meals. Weigh yourself once a week. Drink plenty of fluids.

DIET -
After your esophageal surgery, you are not restricted in the foods you eat. It is not important what you eat, but rather how you eat it. Take small bites and chew your food well. Meats and breads are always most difficult to swallow. You may experience fullness (bloating) after eating. To minimize this discomfort, we recommend eating small frequent meals. Avoid gas producing foods (for example: beans, cabbage) and carbonated beverages.
YOUR RECOVERY (continued)

Following surgery there may be some swelling in the area of the esophagus which was operated upon. You may, therefore, experience some sticking of food. This should resolve within the first two or three weeks. If it continues, notify your surgeon.

CONSTIPATION -
Changing your normal food and fluid intake, decreased activity and use of pain medications often result in constipation. If you are constipated, you may take a gentle laxative. This problem should resolve after you return to your normal routine and discontinue use of narcotic pain medicine.

ACTIVITY -
You will fatigue easily at first, but you will build up strength and energy by being persistent. Walking is an excellent activity for increasing stamina.

It takes about three months for complete healing of your incision, muscles and ribs. Do not lift more than twenty pounds during this time. When doing all activities, especially lifting, remember to breathe. Don't hold your breath. Breathe out when the work is hardest.

WOUND CARE -
Keep your wound clean by showering daily. Wash the incision and chest tube site(s) with soap and water. A dressing is not necessary unless there is drainage. Do not apply ointments or cream directly on the incision until you have seen your doctor for your postoperative appointment.

SLEEP -
When you are first at home you may find it difficult to sleep a full eight hours. You may have difficulty finding a comfortable position. Gradually this will improve. If you nap or are inactive during the day, you might hinder a good night's sleep. Try to get back to your normal schedule as soon as possible.

NAUSEA -
If you should experience nausea and retching or dry heaves, call your surgeon. Attempting to vomit places strain on the repair site. This should be avoided until healing is complete. A medication to alleviate the nausea will be prescribed.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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. 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.

What about healing of the incisions?
As stated before, 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.

Why do I feel full after eating?
The operation prevents reflux and also makes it difficult (if not impossible) to belch. The reason you experience "fullness" after eating is that swallowed air is trapped in your stomach. This air will eventually pass through the intestines as gas.

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

What can be done to speed recovery?
Continue your deep breathing and coughing exercises at home, and steadily increase your activity.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (continued)

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's also largely due to muscles being out of condition. It is estimated that a college student loses 15 percent of his muscle strength after one week of bedrest. Therefore, it is not surprising that a patient who has been hospitalized and had undergone chest surgery feels weak or tires easily in the first few weeks at home. To regain strength you must exercise daily. Do not allow yourself to be inactive.

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 from the wound accompanied by fever.

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. In addition, patients who are over 50 years old are often discharged on Lanoxin. Lanoxin is a medication which helps regulate your heart rate. It is prescribed to prevent any heart irregularities which occasionally occur after surgery. If this medication has been prescribed, you will take it for one month, and it will then be discontinued.

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

When will I see the doctor?
Your first post operative 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 off work for 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.