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Thyroidectomy and Parathyroidectomy Patients: What to Expect After Surgery

Parathyroid procedures often allow for same-day discharge. Thyroid procedures may go home same day or may need to be admitted to hospital.

What should I expect after my operation?

- You will see **swelling** under the incision and/or **bruising** under it in a few days. You may also feel the sensation of swelling and/or firmness that can last for a month or more.
- Neck incisions heal rapidly, within a week or two. *You can get them wet after about 24 hours.*
- Your scar will be most visible 1 – 2 months after the operation and gradually fade over the next 6 – 8 months. As it heals, a scar looks more pink or red than the skin around it.
- You may feel a firm **'healing ridge'** directly under the incision. This is normal and will soften and go away when healing is complete, within 3 – 6 months.
- All incisions are *sensitive to sunlight*. For one year after surgery, you should use sunscreen when outdoors for long periods to prevent darkening of the scar area.
- We recommend that you **not expose** the incision to the *ultraviolet lights* used in tanning booths.

Will my neck hurt?

- Most patients experience very little pain, but you may feel *some neck stiffness/soreness* in your shoulder, back or neck and *tension headache* that takes a few days or weeks to go away completely.
- Some patients also notice minor changes in swallowing, which improve over time.
- The skin just above and below your incision will *feel numb*. This will improve over several months, but some people may have a long-term decrease in sensation.
- You may apply a cold pack over your incision to improve the pain and help reduce swelling.

How will I manage my pain at home?

- Take NSAIDS like ibuprofen (*Motrin, Advil*), naproxen (*Aleve*) or acetaminophen (*Tylenol*) every 6 hours for the first 3 – 5 days after your surgery. This will minimize the pain you feel.
- To **prevent Tylenol overdose**, do not take a regular Tylenol dose at the same time as *Tylenol #3 with codeine* or *Tramacet*. However, you may take them 4 – 6 hours apart.
- If you have sore/stiff muscles in your back, shoulder or neck, you may use *moist warm heat or a heating pad* on the affected areas, 15 – 20 minutes at a time several times a day.
- *Gently massaging* your neck muscles will improve the neck stiffness.
- Do not be afraid to move your neck. *Gently flexing and stretching* your neck muscles will prevent stiffness.
- Stronger pain medication or narcotic (like *Tylenol #3, Tramacet*) for severe pain is rarely needed. If it is, however, **DO NOT drive a car or drink alcohol** while taking these medications.
- Narcotics also cause **constipation**. Stool softeners (*Colace*) and fiber (fruits, bran, vegetables) and extra fluid intake helps. A stimulant laxative (*Milk of Magnesia, Senokot*) may be needed as well.

Will my voice be affected?

- Your voice may be hoarse or weak at first, because the surgery took place near the voice box, but usually recovers within weeks.

Are there any diet restrictions?

- No, return to your previous diet and always eat a well balanced diet.

How will I care for my incision?

- If you have paper 'steri strips' on your incision, leave them in place until they begin to fall off naturally. If they become discolored or messy, you may remove them 14 days after your operation.
- You may shower, then gently pat dry your incision.
- **Do not** apply ointments or powders to the incision site.
- Avoid using Vitamin E cream or other moisturizers on the incision until after your first follow-up visit.

What new medications might I take home?

- **Calcium supplement:** your body's calcium levels may fall after a total thyroidectomy or parathyroid operation. You may be taking 3 – 6 calcium carbonate tablets per day, depending on your doctor's recommendation. You will need to take calcium at different times to avoid medication interaction. Ask your pharmacist, nurse, or doctor about specific interactions.
- **Thyroid hormone:** If you have had a thyroid operation, you may be prescribed thyroid hormone replacement, called levothyroxine (*Synthroid*). A blood test will be done in 6 – 8 weeks to ensure the dosage is correct.
- **Vitamin D:** If your doctor has prescribed a vitamin D supplement, like Calcitriol (*Rocaltrol*), this may be filled at any pharmacy.

When can I go back to normal activities?

- You may return to work in 2 – 3 weeks or sooner if desired. *Contact Dr. McMullen's office if you need employer or insurance forms completed.* Please note that **there will be a charge for completion of these forms**, as this service is not covered by Alberta Healthcare. The office will be able to advise you on the cost for this service.
- You may drive as long as you are not taking any narcotics and your neck stiffness is resolved.

Can I resume my previous medications?

- Yes, unless directed not to by your doctor.
- **Before discharge from the hospital, be sure to review your previous medications with your doctor or resident.**

Follow-up visit:

- Please *call Dr. McMullen's office* once you are discharged from the hospital to book your postoperative followup appointment, which will be 4 – 6 weeks after your surgery. **Please arrange this promptly.**
- If blood tests have been requested at the time of your return visit, please remember to get these done within the week before your appointment.

When do I call for advice?

- If your temperature goes above 100.5°F or 38°C.
- You have trouble talking or breathing.
- Your fingers/hands or face around your lips becomes numb and tingling (your calcium level may be too low).
- You have trouble swallowing.
- Your incision becomes swollen, red, or drainage occurs.

If you have questions or concerns, you may email Dr. McMullen at todd.mcmullen@ualberta.ca or call our office Monday – Friday, 9am to 4pm, at 780-407-1108

On weekends, holidays, or evenings, call 780-407-6191 (hospital paging) and ask for the general surgeon on-call.