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POSTOPERATIVE SHOULDER ARTHROSCOPY INSTRUCTIONS

General

Recovering from shoulder surgery requires a good deal of patience as well as motivation and dedication to post-operative therapy. The shoulder is very susceptible to post-operative stiffness. Therefore, avoiding this complication is extremely important in making a quick recovery. Shoulder stiffness usually results in prolonged postoperative pain and is difficult to treat once it occurs.

Pain control

The shoulder has a very rich nerve supply and therefore it is common to experience postoperative pain. The length of time that you will experience pain varies significantly from patient to patient.

You will be given a narcotic pain medication (Vicodin in most cases) to control your pain after surgery. Please begin taking the pain medication as soon as the nerve block begins to wear off. Do not wait until the shoulder becomes fully painful before taking the pain medication. For the first three days or so, you should take the medication frequently since significant pain leads to muscle spasms, which will then increase the possibility of shoulder stiffness.

Dressing changes

A bulky dressing will be placed on your shoulder in the operating room. You should remove this dressing the day after surgery and leave the wound exposed to air without any dressing on it. This allows the small arthroscopic incision wounds to dry and then seal. You may take a shower as soon as the small portal incisions seal. This generally takes 24-48 hours. Do not swim or immerse the shoulder under water until after your first postoperative visit with the doctor in approximately 4 days.

Motion

Restoring motion is the most important goal of the first month of recovery. If good motion can be obtained early in the post-operative course, pain is usually lessened and it is much easier to work on strengthening and tone. Although you will be seen by a therapist, you will need to do exercises at home seven days a week. Initially your doctor will give you instructions on doing simple "pendulum" exercises that will keep your shoulder supple without discomfort. In addition, it is important to try to bring your arm above your head at least twice daily and hold it there for several minutes. **This should only be done while lying down on your back.** If possible, a family member or friend can help you with this. You should begin doing your exercises the day after surgery. Depending on which surgical procedure has been done, you may also be able to start actively moving the shoulder (in addition to the pendulum and gentle stretching exercises). Your doctor will let you know about this.

Physical Therapy

Your physical therapy should begin within seven days of surgery. Please advise your doctor immediately if these arrangements have not been made. Initially, you should be seen three times a week. Once you are making adequate progress, this may be reduced by the therapist. The therapist will be following a very specific protocol to achieve full motion as early as possible, reduce pain and swelling, and begin work on strengthening of the muscles. It should be emphasized, however, that the most important therapy and the therapy that will have the greatest benefit is what you do at home.

Use of a sling

A sling will be placed on your shoulder in the operating room. Depending on the exact procedure performed, you will either be able to discard it the next day or be asked to wear it for a period of 2 to 4 weeks. Your doctor will advise you about this the day after surgery.

Activity

Some procedures require the use of a sling for several weeks; however, in many cases you will be allowed to use the arm without any specific restrictions. If this is the case, you may use the arm actively according to your pain tolerance. There is a degree of post-operative inflammation which does make the shoulder very irritable for the first six weeks. Therefore, it is best to limit your activities to your routine daily activities and to avoid strenuous lifting or participating in sports during this time. If you do overdo things, the shoulder will become more painful and possibly more swollen for a few days and then quickly settle down.

Driving

You will not be able to drive a car for approximately one to three weeks. This depends on which shoulder is involved and on whether or not you drive a manual transmission. The most important consideration, however, is whether your shoulder has recovered sufficiently to have a normal reaction time in an emergency situation behind the wheel. A shoulder that is fresh from a major surgical procedure is not as quick to respond as a normal shoulder. The return of confidence in the operative shoulder to allow safe driving is somewhat variable but, in general, you should be able to drive within three weeks. If you are very comfortable driving one-armed, you can drive much sooner after the surgery.