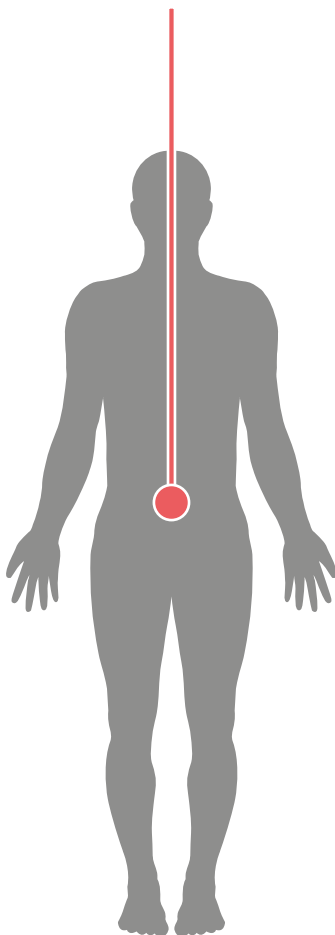


# Get Well Soon

Helping you to make a speedy recovery after a slipped disc operation

## Discectomy



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This leaflet is a guide to recovering from a slipped disc operation. It does not provide specific medical advice or diagnosis, nor does it give advice about whether you should consent to an operation. All of these matters depend on individual medical advice from your consultant surgeon based on your own health, medical condition and personal circumstances.

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## Who this leaflet is for

### Print instructions:

To print this document click once on the print icon in your Acrobat Browser, or go to File, then Print on the drop down menu.

To print only one page, select the page number you want in your print menu, usually under 'options' or 'preferences' depending on the printer type.

To save ink, select the 'draft' option.

This leaflet is for anyone who is recovering from, or is about to undergo surgery to treat what's sometimes called a "slipped disc". In fact, discs do not slip, they tear or burst to cause back pain and the central soft portion may squirt out to press on the nerves to cause leg pain (sometimes called sciatica). This usually settles without invasive treatment but sometimes needs an operation on the back to remove the burst disc which is causing leg pain.

The technical term for your operation is a discectomy, which is how your surgeon and other health professionals who are helping you may refer to it. This leaflet should be read in conjunction with any other information you have already been given about your procedure.

The following information is designed to help you to make the important decisions about your recovery - such as when you should go back to work and generally just get back to enjoying life the way you like it. Your surgeon, GP and other healthcare professionals will offer you a lot of very good advice - but ultimately it's you that has to make the decisions.

The advice in this leaflet offers broad guidelines for people who do not have any complications with their surgery, or other specific medical circumstances, such as a long-term condition.

Obviously, every individual has different needs and recovers in different ways - so not all the advice in this leaflet will be suitable for everybody. When you're weighing up how to make the decision that's right for you, talk to your surgeon, your GP, or your Occupational Health service at work, if you have one. They will all help you to make the right choices for a safe and speedy recovery.

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## What to expect after the operation

### Painkillers

Painkillers may well cause constipation, so it's important to get plenty of fibre in your diet while you are recovering. Fresh fruit and vegetables will help to keep your bowels moving regularly.

### Scar

You will have a small scar, about 1-3 inches long for a single disc operation (longer if required), overlying the lower part of your backbone.

### Stitches

Your skin may be closed with adhesive strips or occasionally with stitches or clips. These should be removed as directed by your surgeon or nurse. If you have stitches, these will be removed around 10 days after your operation.

### Dressings

Your stitches may be covered by a simple adhesive dressing - like a large sticking plaster. Wash carefully until you have your stitches out, so that the dressing doesn't get wet. After you've had your stitches out, you won't need a dressing anymore and you'll be able to bath and shower as normal.

### Discomfort

Immediately after the surgery you will have some pain in and around the area of your operation, but your surgeon will ensure that you have pain relief to make you comfortable and help you to move. Usually the original pain in the leg improves almost immediately, but if it does not, be sure to tell the nurses and your doctor. A very small number of people may experience difficulty passing urine after the operation. Usually this is simply a temporary disturbance of bladder function, but very rarely complications may cause the nerves to the legs or bladder to stop working so it's important that you tell your doctor and nurses immediately.

### Rehabilitation

After your operation, you will be working with a physiotherapist, who will monitor your specific needs and help you safely to regain strength and movement. Exercising the spine as prescribed will help you to make a much swifter recovery than if you remain inactive.

### Tiredness and feeling emotional

Your body uses a lot of energy to heal itself, so you will feel more tired than normal - sometimes it can come upon you suddenly. If you feel upset or emotional in the days and weeks after your operation, don't worry - this is a perfectly normal reaction which many people experience.

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## Things that will help you recover more quickly

If you live alone, and you do not have family or friends close by, organise support in advance - have family or friends come to stay with you for the first few days after surgery if possible.

### **Eat healthily**

Eating a healthy diet will help to ensure that your body has all the nutrients it needs to heal.

### **Stop smoking**

By not smoking - even if it's just for the time that you're recovering - you immediately start to improve your circulation and your breathing - not to mention a whole list of other benefits to the heart and lungs.

### **Family and friends**

Family and friends can give you two important things:

- Practical help with the tasks you might be temporarily unable to do while you recover - such as driving, the weekly shop, or lifting heavier items.
- Keeping your spirits up- the novelty soon wears off being home alone all day, and it's easy to feel isolated by this. Having company can help you to worry less. It's important not to let anxiety set in, as it can become a problem in itself which stands in the way of you getting back to your normal routine.

### **Keep a routine**

Get up at your normal time in the morning, get dressed and move about the house. If you get tired, you can rest later.

### **Build up gradually**

Have a go at doing some of the things you'd normally do, but build up gradually. Some suggestions are included in the recovery tracker. Obviously, everyone recovers at a different speed, so not all of the suggestions will be suitable for everybody.

When you're building up your activities, you may feel more tired than normal. If so, stop, and rest until your strength returns. If you feel pain, stop immediately and consult your GP.

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## Returning to work

You do not need your GP's permission to go back to work – this is ultimately your decision, but listen to the advice offered to you.

### **Fact: Work can be part of your recovery**

Everyone needs time off to recover after an operation - but too much of it can stand in the way of you getting back to normal. In fact, by staying off for too long, people can become isolated and depressed. Getting back to your normal work routine sooner rather than later can actually help you to recover more quickly.

### **Getting back to work**

How quickly you return to work very much depends on a number of things:

- How you heal.
- How you respond to surgery.
- The type of job you do.

People whose work involves a lot of heavy lifting, or standing up or walking for long periods of time, will not be able to return to work as quickly as those who have office jobs which are less demanding physically.

### **How soon can I go back?**

Every person recovers differently and has different needs. Most people can safely return to work 4 to 6 weeks after a discectomy if most of your job is done sitting down, or is generally light work.

### **Keep moving**

While you're recovering, you should avoid sitting or standing in one position for more than 15 or 20 minutes, as you can get stiff and sore. Try stretching, and walk around regularly while at work.

However, if your job involves a lot of driving, lifting items that weigh over 5kg, or potentially violent situations, it is advisable to remain off work for 12 weeks. As an alternative, you may wish to discuss with your employer the option of going back to work to do lighter duties than this which present less risk to your back.

If your employer has an occupational health nurse or doctor they will advise you on this. Alternatively your GP can give you advice. Ultimately, it's your decision when you want to go back, and there's no insurance risk to your employer if you choose to do so.

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## Planning for your return

### 3 golden rules for a speedy recovery:

Stay active.

Keep a normal daily routine.

Keep social contact with people.

Talk to your Occupational Health service or GP to work out when and how is best for you to return to work.

Depending on the nature of your job, you might want to ask your employer about returning to work on lighter duties at first. This means:

- Spending more time sitting rather than standing or walking
- Doing work that is mostly paperwork, using a computer or telephone
- Not carrying more than around 5kg any significant distance
- Avoiding tasks such as prolonged loading or unloading, packing or unpacking.

If you have an HR Department at work, they will be able to advise you on how your absence might affect any benefits you may be receiving during your time off.

Depending on the nature of their job, some people who've had a discectomy find that they need to be redeployed into a role which is less strenuous - particularly if their job demands a lot of heavy lifting, driving or potentially violent situations. If you think this redeployment may be the best option for you, talk to your workplace Occupational Health service.

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## Driving

Your insurance company should be informed about your operation. Some companies will not insure drivers for a number of weeks after surgery, so it's important to check what your policy says.


### **Driving - an exercise**

Before resuming driving, you should be free from the sedative effects of any painkillers you may be taking. You should be comfortable in the driving position and able to safely control your car, including freely performing an emergency stop. Practise this in a safe place without putting the key in the ignition. If you feel pain, stop immediately. If you feel sore afterwards, wait for a day or two before trying again. It is advisable not to restart driving with a long journey.

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## Recovery tracker

Days Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
1–3 days	Pain deep inside (especially when moving) and some discomfort around the wound. A very small number of people may have difficulty in passing urine. You should notice an improvement in your leg pain. Most people will be discharged from hospital and back at home around day 3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eat and drink as normal</li><li>• Take painkillers and antibiotics as prescribed by your doctor.</li><li>• Inform your doctor or nurses if you have difficulty passing urine.</li><li>• Stay positive and involved in your care. You will be helped to get up and moving around the ward quite soon after your operation.</li></ul>		<b>No</b>

### specific print instructions:

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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
3–12 days	You may still feel some discomfort in your back and around your wound, though there should be no difficulties passing urine as normal. Your stitches will be removed after approximately 10 days.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good posture is important at all times. Avoid heavy lifting, awkward twisting or leaning forwards to do ordinary tasks.</li> <li>• Stick to the routine of exercises that the physiotherapist gives you to do. This will help you to avoid stiffness of the muscles and joints.</li> <li>• Maintain a normal routine: get up at your normal time, move around the house, eat and drink as normal. If you feel tired, stop and rest.</li> <li>• Wash carefully, ensuring that you avoid harsh shampoo and perfumed soaps on the wound for about one week. Baby shampoo, simple soap or just water is best. Don't soak in a bath during this time.</li> <li>• You may still need to take a mild painkiller at this time.</li> </ul>		<b>No</b>

### When can I have sex?

For many women, being able to have sex again is an important milestone in their recovery. There are no set rules or times about when it's right to do so other than whether it feels OK to you – treat it like any other physical activity and build up gradually.

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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
2-5 weeks	The pain should be less, and strength returning gradually each day. However, you can still expect to feel sudden tiredness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to work closely with your physio and outpatient team, and follow the exercises designed to build up your strength.</li> <li>Go for a short walk in the morning - no more than 5-10 minutes - then go home and rest. Go for another short walk or two later in the day, resting between each one. This will help to avoid stiffness of the muscles and joints. Gradually build up your amount of activity each day.</li> </ul>		<b>Getting there</b>
6 weeks	You should be free of pain by now, and find that you have the strength to do most of your normal daily activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Swimming or other gentle exercise that does not put a large amount of stress on the spine.</li> <li>Driving for short periods of time - provided you've checked with your GP and your insurance company.</li> <li>Return to work if you have a desk job.</li> <li>You may still need to take a mild painkiller at this time.</li> </ul>		Yes - provided you don't have to stand for long periods, or do any heavy lifting. Remember, it's important to get up and move about every 20 minutes or so.

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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
12 weeks		By now, you can begin to drive for longer periods and do most activities as normal, except for contact sports. If you have a job that involves a lot of driving or lifting, you may now return to work on lighter duties.		<b>Yes</b>
14 weeks		If you haven't had any complications to do with your surgery, and you're still off work, it's likely that you're feeling anxious about returning to work and could do with a bit of help from your GP and your employer. Talk to them both about a gradual return to work. If you're off for too long, there's a risk of developing problems to do with anxiety, isolation, and lack of confidence.		<b>Yes</b>

If your leg pain returns all of a sudden at any point while you are recovering, be sure to report it to your doctor.

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## After you get home

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How many hours rest I needed:	What times I needed to rest	What time did I pass urine?	How is my leg feeling?	Went to bed at ... pm
1							
2							
3							

Keeping a track of what you've achieved each day will help you to stay positive and get back to enjoying your normal life more quickly.

### specific print instructions:

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## After you get home

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How much rest I needed after each:	Went to bed at ... pm	How's the feeling around your: wound? Leg?	Improvements or changes in the level of pain you feel:	Emotional feelings?	What do you want to achieve tomorrow?
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								

Remember, take a step-by-step approach to getting better, and build up your activities in small stages. Don't push yourself too far too fast. If you're concerned about anything, or if you feel you're not making progress fast enough, ask your surgeon or call your GP.

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## After you get home

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How much rest I needed after each:	Went to bed at ... pm	How's the feeling around your: wound? Leg?	Improvements or changes in the level of pain you feel:	Emotional feelings?	What do you want to achieve tomorrow?
11								
12								
13								
14								

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## Keeping well

Because of your operation, the chances are you'll be a lot more aware of your body and how it works.

Right now is a really good time to build on the knowledge you've gained and make small changes to your lifestyle which can prevent you from experiencing certain health problems in the future. You can do this by:

- Improving your diet - get 5 portions of fresh fruit and veg per day
- Any exercise - even if it's just a few short walks each day - really will make a difference to your health.
- Quit smoking - NHS Stop Smoking Services are one of the most effective ways to stop for good - and they're completely free. Your doctor will be happy to help you.

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## Website links

The internet's a great thing – anything you want to know is there for you at the click of a mouse, but do be careful about the way you use it when it comes to getting information about your health. It's hard to know which sites to trust and none of them can tell you anything that's specific to your individual medical needs.

If you do want to know more about your operation, recovery or return to work, here is a list of trusted websites that offer safe, sensible, useful information:

[Royal College of Surgeons of England](http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/)  
<http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/>

[British Orthopaedic Association](http://www.boa.ac.uk/)  
<http://www.boa.ac.uk/>

[The Society of British Neurological Surgeons](http://www.sbns.org.uk/)  
<http://www.sbns.org.uk/>

[NHS Stop Smoking Service](http://smokefree.nhs.uk/)  
<http://smokefree.nhs.uk/>

[NHS Choices](http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/Homepage.aspx)  
<http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/Homepage.aspx>

[Department for Work and Pensions](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions)  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions>

[GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/)  
<https://www.gov.uk/>

[DVLA - Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency](https://www.gov.uk/browse/driving/disability-health-condition)  
<https://www.gov.uk/browse/driving/disability-health-condition>

Call 111 for nonemergency medical advice