

Medicare Patient Post Op Primer

You are about to have a surgery with us and you are over 65. This is for you. Surgery, recovery, and resumption of activity are a little tougher on you now than when you were 25. So this document is to help you plan for those events a little better and hopefully succeed more.

About 20% of the over 65 patients discharged after surgery are readmitted within 30 days. Why?

Medication issues. Taking too much pain medication and getting so constipated, delirious, or not breathing enough to the point that family brings them in.

Generalized frustration. Too many complex instructions, too much to remember, unwillingness to perform a whole series of daily activities in order to get well and stay well. So they give up and come in for adult supervision.

Pneumonia. Often from laying around and not being active.

DVT (deep venous thrombosis). Comes from laying around and not being active.

Frustrated caregiver/family. It's a lot of work to help an older patient get better after surgery. For any number of reasons, they can't/won't devote the time to help, so they bring the patient in for someone else to do it.

Expectations from past experience. The patient and family expect to be in the hospital for longer, so they come back after discharge to accomplish their wish.

Readmissions are bad. Why? Readmitted patients tend to just sit around the hospital and end up with a higher complication rate, slower recovery, and worse infections from dangerous hospital germs. Readmits are also expensive in a system that already is felt to spend too much. Also, the readmitted patient takes a bed (there are very few inpatient beds) that often is needed for another patient that can then have their surgery postponed, canceled, or transferred because there is no room at the Inn.

What is the solution? Several things are suggested:

Use your inpatient time wisely. You are going to be home within 24-48 hours of surgery. Spend your inpatient time learning the skills you will need at home, rather than just laying around watching TV and reading.

Have a realistic expectation of post op. You are going to need some help in the first few days and weeks after going home. Set that up! Shop for extra food that is simple to prepare. Arrange people to help with pets, trash, etc. And it is generally best to have a friend or family either in your house with you or checking in on you daily for the first couple weeks. You will not be pain free, you will be a little slower, and things will just be a little awkward for several days or weeks. None of this means a problem unless you let it spiral out of control. Have a realistic plan and work that plan.

Have a real goal of weaning from the pain medications. Pain generally will not get you readmitted to the hospital or kill you, but those pain medications sure can. Accept some element of pain as a baseline and don't take the medications to the point of severe constipation, delirium, sleeping all day, being goofy, etc. Heating pads, ice packs, gentle massage, range of motion, walking around, OTC meds and just simple distraction (doing something fun) are all safer and often just as effective as a narcotic. Try them first and don't just grab the pill bottle every 6 hours.

Follow your activity instructions. Walk 4 times a day for at least 10 minutes. Get out of the house! There is tremendous mental health value in showering, putting on real clothes and going and doing something as opposed to just sitting around the house in your jammies all day.

Accept your limitations. You are not 25 and you will heal slower now. Don't fight that and try to pretend you are a vigorous 25 year old. Ask for help when you need it. Be limited in your activities. Give your body and mind time to recover.

Avoid Depression. As much as 1/3 of over 65 patients get real depression after surgery. These feelings are real. Try and do things that make you happy every day. Don't set such pressure packed goals that you constantly feel you are failing. Talk about how you feel. As mentioned prior, take a shower, put on fresh clothes, leave the house and do something fun every day. Way better than lounging around in your pajamas, staying up until 1am and sleeping in until 10am.