Getting Back On Your Feet Following Surgery

by ANNA SCANLON

Lupus and Surgery Recovery

Writing about recovering from surgery with lupus is particularly apropos for me, as I have undergone two minor surgeries in the last two months. Suffice it to say, it knocked me off my feet pretty hard.

But, now that I'm feeling a little bit better, I'm ready to share some of my tips and tricks for making sure your surgery goes smoothly and that you get back to your best self as soon as possible.

Be Open and Honest With Your Doctor

Before your surgery, make sure your doctor is aware of your entire medical history and the full extent of your lupus. If you haven't been diagnosed yet and are experiencing lupus symptoms, ask your doctor to perform a lupus panel before having surgery.

This way, the doctors will know exactly what they are dealing with and if your lupus or lupus-like symptoms are active in the body. This can make a huge difference when it comes to things like anesthesia and the way you recover, so it is very important that everyone on your medical team is on the same page.

Be Prepared

I know I emphasize preparedness in almost every article I write, but I can't really stress it enough. Unless your surgery is an emergency, it is important that you're both mentally and physically ready for your operation.

Although you may not feel well in the days leading up to your surgery, it is important to eat as much and as healthily as you can so your body will have a strong basis for recovery. This doesn't mean overindulging, but simply getting the correct amount of food for your body type.

If you're having issues digesting food or simply aren't hungry, you can supplement with drinks such as Ensure and Gatorade to help keep your system going.

Plenty of sleep is also extremely important. It can be difficult (I know, the night before surgery I didn't sleep a wink!), but it is important not to let anxiety get the best of you. Aside from proper nutrition, a healthy amount of sleep is paramount for promoting healing after your operation.

If you are in the hospital, ask your nurse if it is possible to get you something to help you relax. After my last surgery, I didn't sleep the night before and was unable to go to sleep the night after due to a combination of pain and noise in the hospital ward.

That meant the morning after, I was incredibly nauseated and generally feeling even worse than I was before I had gone into surgery. It wasn't until I had a good night's sleep that I started to feel better.

You should also be very vigilant about instructions doctors give you in regards to food before surgery. Typically, you are not allowed to eat or drink anything from the midnight before your surgery, but sometimes drinking or light snacks can be made available up to six hours before your surgery.

If you have difficulty fasting, speak to your doctor about this so that you're not uncomfortable. Likely, during your fasting period, you will be set up with intravenous fluids so that you stay hydrated.

Next page: what to expect after surgery, and more lupus and surgery care advice.

Know What to Expect After Surgery

If this is your first surgery, speak with your doctor about what is going to happen afterward.

Where will you wake up? Where will you be taken afterward? When can your friends and family see you? When can you eat and drink again? Will you be fitted with a catheter or will you be allowed to get up immediately following surgery? This will minimize anxiety and put you on the road to recovery much quicker.

Your doctor should also speak to you about complications that can occur and what to look out for in the days after surgery. Don't take this as a doom and gloom scenario as major complications are not very common.

However, as a lupus patient, there are specific ones, like blood clots, you need to make sure you know how to identify. You can also discuss ways to prevent these kinds of complications (such as pills, shots or even compression stockings) to minimize your risk.

Be Gentle With Yourself

Aside from preparedness, this is my number one tip for lupus patients. After the first surgery I had, I was so sick of lying in bed that when I began to feel better, I immediately began to take on far too much. This lead to me feeling a lot worse, and actually landed me back in the hospital.

Don't take a page from my book. Instead, take things slowly. When the doctor says that normal recovery is two weeks, tack on an extra week or two.

During this time, avoid anything strenuous such as heavy lifting, intense workouts or activities that could potentially cause injury. Always assume it is going to take you a little bit longer to recover than a non-lupus patient.

This doesn't mean, however, that you should lie in bed the entire recovery period. Your doctor may tell you to stay on bed rest with minimal activity for a few days, and of course you can tack on a couple of days as an added insurance. But after that, it is important that you get your body moving — in a gentle way.

Start out slowly — taking short walks around the neighbourhood, preparing small meals for yourself and your family, or doing one or two chores around the house that you usually do. Moving around helps prevent blood clots and improves blood flow, two very important aspects of recovery.

Keep Your Medication Routine Regular

Make sure that during your recovery process, you are very vigilant about both your lupus medication and anything else your doctor may have given you. If you find you are sleeping a lot during your recovery stage (which is perfectly normal after a trauma to your body), set alarms so that you can wake up to ensure your medication is being taken at regular intervals.

Don't Be Surprised If This Triggers a Lupus Flare

Surgery is a trauma to the body, and any such trauma can bring about a lupus flare. It can be discouraging, especially if the surgery was meant to alleviate pain or a problem that you've been having for a while.

If this is the case, be sure you speak to your rheumatologist right away. This may mean that you will have to go on a short course of steroids or other strong medication to get your body back on track.

Listen to Your Body

Finally, listen to your body. It is best at determining its needs. If you feel exhausted, sleep, as your body is regenerating cells whilst you are sleeping.

If you feel thirsty, have plenty of fluids on hand. Don't overdo it in an effort to speed up the recovery process. You will end up slowing it down in the long run.