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SPINAL CORD STIMULATOR

Trial and permanent implant instructions

A spinal cord stimulator uses thin wires, called leads, placed in the epidural space along the spine to deliver mild electrical signals that change how pain signals reach the brain. Treatment happens in two stages: a short **trial** to see how well the stimulator helps you, and, if the trial is successful, a **permanent implant**.

PART 1: THE TRIAL

During the trial, temporary leads are placed through a needle and connected to a small external battery that you wear. The trial usually lasts 5 to 7 days. A representative from the device company will program the stimulator and stay in contact with you during the trial.

- **Keep the dressing clean, dry, and in place.** Do not shower, bathe, or swim during the trial. You may take a sponge bath, keeping the dressing and leads dry.
- Do not bend, twist, reach overhead, lift more than 5 pounds, or sleep on your stomach. These can move the leads out of position. Keep the battery secured so the leads are not pulled.
- **Keep a daily record** of your pain level, activity, sleep, and pain medication use. Be as active as you safely can so you can judge how much the stimulator helps with your normal activities.
- Do not drive while the stimulator is turned on.
- At the end of the trial, the leads are removed in our office. Removal takes only a few minutes and is usually not painful. The permanent implant is scheduled only after the trial results are reviewed and approved by your insurance.

Call us right away during the trial if you have a fever, redness or drainage at the lead site, a lead that appears to have moved or come out, or a severe headache that is worse when you sit or stand.

PART 2: THE PERMANENT IMPLANT

Please also read our handout **Preparing for Your Procedure**. The facility where your surgery is performed will contact you with your arrival time and its own pre-operative instructions.

SURGERY DAY AND GOING HOME

- Most patients go home the same day. After surgery, you will be monitored in the recovery area until you have recovered from anesthesia.
- **An adult driver must bring you, stay at the facility during your surgery, and drive you home.**
- A responsible adult should stay with you for at least the first 24 hours after you get home.
- For 24 hours after anesthesia, do not drive, drink alcohol, operate machinery, or sign important documents.

CARE OF YOUR INCISION

You will have one or two incisions: one along the middle or lower spine where the leads are anchored and, in most cases, a second one off to the side (usually above the buttock or on the flank) where the battery is placed.

Your incisions are closed with dissolving stitches under the skin. The skin is covered with either adhesive strips (Steri-Strips), which fall off on their own in about a week, or skin glue, or staples, which are removed in our office 10 to 14 days after surgery.

- **Leave the surgical dressing in place until your first wound check**, usually 2 to 3 days after surgery.
- After the wound check, you may shower once the incision has been clean and dry for 24 hours. Keep showers to 5 to 7 minutes. Let the water run gently over the incision; do not aim the shower spray directly at it.
- Do not scrub the incision or apply soap directly to it. Gently pat it dry; do not rub.
- Change the dressing daily for 10 days, or until all drainage has stopped, whichever is longer.
- Do not apply ointments, creams, powders, or other medications to the incision.
- **Do not soak the incision** in a bathtub, swimming pool, hot tub, or the Gulf for at least 6 weeks.
- A small amount of drainage for the first several days, mild swelling, and mild bruising are common. Call us if there is significant drainage, spreading redness, or a large amount of swelling.

PAIN AFTER SURGERY

Most patients have mild to moderate pain at the incision. Numbing medicine used during surgery usually wears off after 6 to 8 hours, so it is common for incision pain to increase that evening and the next day.

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) is usually enough to control the pain, unless your physician tells you otherwise. You may also be given a short prescription for pain medication.
- Apply ice packs wrapped in a thin towel to the area for 15 to 20 minutes at a time as needed for discomfort and swelling. Never place ice directly on the skin.
- Pain medicine will not remove all of your discomfort. Some soreness at the incision is expected while you heal.

ACTIVITY: PROTECTING THE LEADS

For the first 6 weeks, scar tissue is forming around the leads to hold them in place. **Protecting the leads during this time is the most important thing you can do for the long-term success of your stimulator.**

- Rest for the first 24 hours after surgery. Then, for 6 weeks: **do not bend at the waist, twist, stretch, or reach overhead**, and do not lift, push, or pull anything heavier than 8 pounds (about a gallon of milk).
- Limit stair climbing for the first 6 weeks. Focus on gentle walking, gradually increasing your time and distance.
- Avoid driving or long car rides for the first 2 weeks. Never drive with the stimulator turned on or while taking prescription pain medication.
- After 6 weeks, you may gradually return to light lifting and normal activities if you are comfortable. **If it hurts, do not do it.**

DIET AND MEDICATIONS

- You may return to your regular diet right away.
- You may restart your regular medications right away, with these exceptions:
- **Aspirin:** restart the day after surgery unless your physician tells you otherwise.

- **Blood thinners** such as warfarin (Coumadin), clopidogrel (Plavix), apixaban (Eliquis), rivaroxaban (Xarelto), or dabigatran (Pradaxa): **we will tell you when to restart.** Then follow up with the doctor who prescribes your blood thinner.
- **Constipation** is common after surgery and anesthesia, especially if you take pain medication. Drink plenty of water. An over-the-counter stool softener or laxative, such as MiraLAX, can help.

RETURNING TO WORK

Most patients with light-duty jobs return to work 3 to 4 weeks after surgery. Patients whose jobs require heavy lifting or physical labor may need longer. We will discuss your return to work at your follow-up visit.

FOLLOW-UP APPOINTMENTS

- **2 to 3 days after surgery:** wound check and dressing change in our office.
- **10 to 14 days after surgery:** second wound check and removal of staples, if you have them.
- **6 to 8 weeks after surgery:** routine follow-up visit.

LIVING WITH YOUR STIMULATOR

- Carry your device identification card at all times and show it at airport security and to any doctor or hospital.
- **Before any MRI, surgery, or procedure that uses electrical equipment,** tell the provider that you have a spinal cord stimulator. Only certain systems are safe for MRI, and only under specific conditions.

WHEN TO CALL US

Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room if you have:

- Weakness, paralysis, or inability to move your arms or legs
- Loss of control of your bladder or bowels
- Chest pain or difficulty breathing

Call our office right away if you have:

- A fever of 101°F or higher, or chills
- Redness, warmth, swelling, or drainage from the incision, or an incision that opens
- Increasing back or leg pain
- Difficulty urinating
- New numbness, weakness, or a change in your symptoms compared with before surgery

Questions or Concerns

Call Coastal Spine & Pain at **(251) 291-2311**, Monday through Thursday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

For a medical emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

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