

# Get Well Soon

Helping you to make a speedy recovery after Carpal Tunnel Release



The Royal College  
of Surgeons of England

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## Carpal Tunnel Release



This leaflet is a guide to recovering from a carpal tunnel release 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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To save ink, select the 'draft' option.

## WHO THIS LEAFLET IS FOR

This leaflet is for anyone who is recovering from, or is about to undergo surgery to ease the pain, pins & needles and numbness caused by carpal tunnel syndrome. The technical term for your operation is a carpal tunnel release, which is how your surgeon and other health professionals who are helping you may refer to it. It 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 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 decision.

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 Occupational Health service at work, if you have one. Otherwise, talk to your GP. Either one will help you to make the right choices for a safe and speedy recovery.

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## WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER THE OPERATION

### Scar

The operation involves a cut being made at the base of the palm.

### Dressings

You are likely to be discharged with a dressing that supports and protects the incision but which leaves the fingers free for movement. Dressings should be kept dry so, when bathing, it is advisable to cover your dressing using a large-sized rubber glove or a plastic bag.

### Rehabilitation

After your operation you will be working with a physiotherapist, who will monitor your specific needs. However, some general rules that are useful for everyone are:

- Hand elevation is important to prevent swelling and stiffness of the fingers.
- Please remember not to walk with your hand dangling, or to sit with your hand held in your lap.
- It is fine, however, to lower your hand for light use and you should get back to normal light activities as soon as possible as guided by common sense.
- It is safe to use the fingers for day-to-day activities such as eating, dressing, brushing your hair which prevents stiffness and swelling.

### Symptoms

The pain and tingling you experienced at night before the operation should settle immediately.

### Stitches

Your stitches will be removed at about 10 to 14 days after the operation.

### Recovery

You will find that your grip is weaker than before the operation and slightly uncomfortable. This can be a bit frustrating but you should be back to full power by about 12 weeks as healing occurs. Exercises, such as squeezing balls, will not speed the process and indeed if overdone can delay recovery

### 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 keep your bowels moving regularly.

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## THINGS THAT WILL HELP YOU TO RECOVER MORE QUICKLY

### 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, 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 on pages 8-10. Obviously, everyone recovers at a different speed, so not all of the suggestions will be suitable for everybody.

### Don't sleep in - you can always rest later. Staying in bed can cause depression.

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.

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## RETURNING TO WORK

### **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 depends on a number of things:

- How you heal
- Whether one or both hands have been operated on
- The type of job you do, and how much strain it places on your hands.

People whose work involves frequent and heavy use of the hands or a lot of heavy lifting, or typing, for example, will not be able to return to work as quickly as those who have jobs which place less strain on their hands.

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

Every person recovers differently and has different needs. As general guidance, you can anticipate returning as follows: -

**Supervisory, managerial:** 1 to 2 weeks

**Light manual - clerical or secretarial work:** 2 to 4 weeks

**Medium manual - cleaner, carer, nurse, check-out operative:** 4 to 6 weeks

**Heavy manual:** 6 to 10 weeks

**Custodial or rescue services:** 6 to 10 weeks

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 sooner rather than later.

You do not need your GP's permission to go back to work - this is ultimately your decision.

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## Coping with the first few days back at work

It will take you a little while to regain your full confidence when you go back to work. You may be slower than normal at first, so don't take on too much responsibility too soon. Don't be too hard on yourself about this - it's perfectly normal and you'll start to get back up to speed after a few days.

## PLANNING FOR YOUR RETURN

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 avoiding tasks which put a strain on the hands, for example typing, using the telephone, or lifting more than 5kg at a time, amongst other things.

Talk to your employer about ways in which your workplace can be adjusted to suit your needs at this time - using an hands-free phone, for example. Your Occupational Health service will be able to advise on this; if you do not have an Occupational Health service, ask your GP for advice on this matter.

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.

**3 Golden rules for a speedy recovery:** Stay active • Keep a normal daily routine • Keep social contact with people.

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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.

Before resuming driving, you should be free from the sedative effects of any painkillers you may be taking. Before you go out on the road, it's worth sitting in the driving seat - **without putting the key in the ignition** - and testing how comfortable you are in the driving position. In particular, you should be able to comfortably control the steering wheel. It is advisable not to restart driving with a long journey. You must be able to safely control your car, including freely performing an emergency stop.

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## RECOVERY TRACKER

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
1-2 days	You may be experiencing some mild discomfort around the incision at the base of the palm	During this time you should focus on maintaining full movement in the fingers and thumb. Try to use the hand for light activities such as reading, holding a glass, or even light use of a computer keyboard. The hand should be kept up at times when it is not being used	 	No
3-14 days	The pain at the incision should be settling although you will experience discomfort if you use the hand too heavily. You should have recovered full finger movement and any swelling should be settling quickly.	During this time, you should be able to start to use the hand for normal daily activities such as eating, dressing, brushing your hair and teeth. Pain should be used as a guide for what activities are performed and how long for.	 	No



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## RECOVERY TRACKER

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
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2-12 weeks

Your stitches and dressing will have been removed. The scar may become lumpy, firm, tender and pink. The intensity and length of the period of 'scar immaturity' is very variable but it usually settles after about three months. It can be helped by massaging the scar and surrounding area firmly with the moisturising cream.

- Once dressings and stitches are removed, it is safe to get the hand wet in a bath or shower.
- You will experience pain at the base of the palm during firm grip making the hand feel weak. This gradually fades until by the end of this period you should have recovered full power.
- During this time, you should gradually step up your use of the hand, again being guided by discomfort.



See Above

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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		<p>If you haven't had any complications to do with your surgery, and you're still off work, it's possible 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.</p> <p>If you're off for too long, there's a risk of developing problems to do with anxiety, isolation, and lack of confidence. These could affect your quality of life in the long term. Talk to your doctor about how best to avoid this becoming a problem for you.</p>		Yes

### When can I have sex?

For many people, being able to have sex again is an important milestone in their recovery. There are no set rules or times about when it's safe 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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## AFTER YOU GET HOME

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities	How much rest I needed	What times I needed to rest	Went to bed at ... pm	How's the base of your palm feeling?	How's the movement in your hand and fingers?	What more have you been able to do today?
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								

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 or NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.

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## AFTER YOU GET HOME

Day	Got up at ... am	Activities	How much rest I needed	Went to bed at ... pm	How's the base of your palm feeling?	How's the movement in your hands and fingers?	What more have you been able to do today?
10							
11							
12							
13							
14							
Week 3 onwards							

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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:

**BAPRAS: British Association of Plastic Reconstructive & Aesthetic Surgeons**  
[www.bapras.org.uk/cms\\_subcat/377/carpal-tunnel.htm](http://www.bapras.org.uk/cms_subcat/377/carpal-tunnel.htm)

**BSSH: British Society for Surgery of the Hand**  
[www.bssh.ac.uk/patients/commonhandconditions/carpaltunnelsyndrome](http://www.bssh.ac.uk/patients/commonhandconditions/carpaltunnelsyndrome)

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

**NHS Direct - 0845 46 47**  
[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

**Health and Wellbeing**  
<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/HealthAndWellBeing/index.htm>

**DVLA - Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency**  
<http://www.dvla.gov.uk/media/pdf/medical/aagv1.pdf>

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