

Convalescence

Convalescence is the period in which the body recovers from a serious illness, injury or surgery. Changes to your lifestyle may be needed to make sure the body has enough time and rest to allow a complete recovery. Ask your doctor how long you can expect to convalesce - having an estimate will help you to plan your life over the following weeks or months, and reduce the amount of worry you may have. Always take your medication as prescribed by your doctor, because these drugs may help you recover.

Post hospital recovery phase

Getting better from a serious illness requires special care. Usually, recovery begins in hospital. The first few weeks after returning home are known as the 'post hospital recovery phase'. During this time, it is common to feel tired and listless. It is important to understand that these feelings are quite normal, so don't expect too much of yourself.

Set yourself 'recovery goals'

During convalescence, it may be beneficial to set goals for each day which will aid in your recovery. Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Too much bed rest in most cases isn't good for you, particularly if you are elderly. Maintain some level of activity, even if it means just sitting or standing up occasionally. Try getting dressed and moving around the house if possible.
- Ensure your muscles, heart and lungs are working efficiently by gradually increasing your level of activity each day.
- Make sure you get enough rest. Listen to your body and alternate periods of activity with periods of relaxation. Be prepared to say 'no' to things you can't cope with and visitors you don't want to see.
- Keep in touch with family and friends and maintain your social activity, even by telephone.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. If your appetite is poor, try eating small amounts of nutritious foods regularly. Remember that eating well is more important than eating more.
- As your strength returns, find time to do things you enjoy. Keep up with hobbies and aim to get out of the house regularly, even for short outings.

Follow medical advice

You may have been given specific instructions on how to best take care of yourself during your convalescence. Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Take your medication strictly as prescribed.
- Follow all dietary recommendations.
- Continue with any exercises shown to you in hospital by therapists or medical staff.
- Don't remove any dressings until instructed.
- Attend all your check-ups.
- If you are unsure of any factor relating to your convalescence, don't hesitate to contact your doctor.

Seek medical attention

Call your doctor if any of the following danger signals occur:

- Falls
- Periods of confusion
- Severe dizziness when standing up
- Recurrence of the symptoms that sent you to hospital in the first place
- New symptoms such as fever, breathlessness, joint pain or chest pain
- Activities of daily living, such as preparing meals, become a struggle

- Severe depression.

The psychological effect of serious illness

A serious illness, operation or injury can sometimes have a long lasting emotional impact. This is especially true if the illness caused permanent medical problems. Common experiences could include:

- Your life is put on hold for the weeks or months it may take you to convalesce.
- Missing out on work, school, sports, hobbies and social events can make you feel miserable.
- You may feel depressed and anxious because of chronic pain, boredom, or your sudden dependence on others to look after you.
- The realisation that you are mortal can make you brood about your own death and the death of loved ones.
- You may experience phobic reactions - for example, you may be afraid of travelling in a car if you received your injuries in a car accident.
- Anything that reminds you of your serious illness, accident or surgery may make you feel afraid, depressed or anxious.
- Lifelong medical problems caused by serious illness, injury or surgery can negatively impact on your thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviours for years to come.

Counselling may help

If left unexamined, the psychological trauma of serious illness can influence your future decisions, including the way you live your life and interact with other people. If you experience disabling emotions of depression, stress or anxiety during your convalescence, you might consider seeking help. A mental health professional, such as a trained counsellor or psychologist, can help you work through your feelings and come to terms with your illness, accident or surgery. Talk to your doctor for further information, advice and referral.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Nurse on Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Counsellor
- Psychologist

Things to remember

- Convalescence is the period in which the body recovers from a serious illness, injury or surgery.
- Changes to your lifestyle may be needed to make sure the body has enough time and rest to allow a complete recovery.
- If left unexamined, the psychological trauma of serious illness can influence your future decisions, including the way you live your life and interact with other people.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

North East Valley Division of General Practice

Copyright © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.