

## **Frequently asked questions about what to expect after your total (or partial) gastrectomy stomach operation**

Here we list some of the common questions that our patients ask. We offer a brief explanation and some advice about things you can do to minimise any problems.

If you experience any symptoms after you get home, take a look in this information first. What you are experiencing might be very common at your stage of recovery. There might also be a simple remedy that previous patients have found to be successful.

We hope this information will help you on your road to recovery.

### **How you are feeling**

#### **When will I feel more normal again?**

You have had a major operation that takes most people at least three months to fully recover from. But with time, you should enjoy life as much as you did before.

#### **I've just got home, and I feel shattered...**

Patients are always surprised at just how tired they are when they first leave hospital. Anyone who has had a major operation will need some time to get over it.

- Also, everything that you need is provided for you while you are in hospital, and everything is close at hand. When you get home, even simple things like having to climb stairs to use the toilet upstairs can seem like hard work. As each day goes by, you will feel stronger and fitter.
- You might find that you need to rest quite often at first.
- You might like to take an afternoon nap.
- For your health and to build your stamina, try to take short walks each day, gradually increasing the distance, as you feel able.

#### **I feel quite low... is this usual?**

It is quite common for patients who have had your operation to feel a bit down when they first get home. This can be caused by the reality of what has been happening over the previous weeks finally sinking in. This feeling usually improves quite quickly as you regain your confidence.

- If your mood doesn't improve, have a word with your general practitioner who might be able to help you.

### **Adjusting your lifestyle**

#### **How will I know if I am doing too much?**

You are the only one to know your limitations. You might feel at first that you are not making much progress - it will take some months before you are back to full fitness.

- Your body will repair itself in its own time, so don't try to rush or overdo things.
- Try to ease back into things gradually.
- Avoid doing anything that causes discomfort or makes you over tired. You can try these again at a later date.

#### **Will I need to modify my lifestyle?**

Because of your treatment, you will need to make some modifications to your lifestyle over the coming months - see below.

## What you eat/drink and how it makes you feel

### What can I eat?

'Eating' is usually the major source of problems after the type of surgery you have had. Any major surgery to the stomach often causes a disruption to the way you can eat and digest your food. This will gradually improve, but some patients will require changes to their diet in the long term.

### I get abdominal pain, feel hot and dizzy after eating my meals. Is this normal?

You might find that some foods no longer 'agree with you' and either give you discomfort, make you feel hot and dizzy or they give you diarrhoea. This is a common problem and is known as 'dumping syndrome'.

Foods that are high in sugar (such as chocolate and sweet puddings) are most likely to rush through your system. This tends to happen immediately after eating and settles again after about half an hour.

- Try eating more slowly, avoiding sweet, sugary foods, and avoiding drinking fluids with your meals.

### How will I know which foods to avoid?

The dietician will provide you with a list of the types of food that you should and should not be eating when you first return home.

- Often, you will need to experiment to find out which foods agree or disagree with your system. And then you can adjust your diet accordingly.
- Avoid any food that seems to cause you discomfort or makes you feel unwell - but you might want to try some of them later on when your system is stronger.

### I feel dizzy, sweaty and unwell between meals - is this normal?

Occasionally, patients feel dizzy, sweaty and unwell between meals. This can be due to a drop in their blood sugar. This doesn't mean you are diabetic but can be remedied in a similar way.

- When you feel like this, try to have a glass of milk or sugary drink.
- It can also be useful to carry some glucose tablets with you.
- Make sure you have something to eat before doing any strenuous activities.

### My food doesn't taste the same now, what can I do?

Many patients say that their taste is altered after their operation. They describe how food either has no taste or a metallic taste. This can last for a few weeks after the surgery.

- To increase the flavour, try eating sharper, spicier foods or adding some spices to your food.
- Try cold food as well as hot because some patients find that cold food is more palatable.
- To improve your taste, if you drink alcohol, try having a small sherry before meals, or a glass of wine with your meal.

### Sometimes I get hiccups, is there anything I can do?

Hiccups have a variety of causes, including indigestion, rapid eating and abdominal distension. Usually they only last for a few minutes.

- You might find that eating and drinking more slowly prevents them.
- Some people find that 'gargling' with water helps treat them.

### Can I drink alcohol?

Unless you have other reasons for not doing so, there is no reason why you cannot drink alcohol in moderation. However, you might feel its effects a little earlier than before your operation.

- If you are taking any medications, do check the label to ensure it is safe to drink alcohol.

## Maintaining your weight

### **I don't feel hungry - does that matter?**

Your appetite is likely to be poor immediately after your surgery. However, it is very important that you maintain your weight. You might have to adapt the way you eat after you get home - see below.

### **What can I do to maintain my weight?**

- To keep your diet healthy, try to eat 'little and often'. This will provide sufficient calories overall to keep your weight up.

### **I can't tolerate large portions of food... is this normal?**

Most patients find they can not tolerate large portions of food after your type of operation. This is because all (for total gastrectomy) or most (for partial gastrectomy) of your stomach has been removed. It will take some time before your body gets used to your new 'plumbing' inside.

### **I am trying very hard but I am still losing weight... should I be worried?**

It is very common for you to continue losing weight after you leave hospital. Immediately after the operation, you will use many of the calories in your diet to repair your body. Some patients continue to lose weight for as long as 12 months after their surgery. It is unlikely that you will return to the weight you were before your operation, but you will establish a new 'fighting weight' soon.

- Be careful with your diet, take note of the information you have been given and your weight should level out within a few months.
- We will closely monitor your weight when you attend the clinic. You might also like to weigh yourself at home weekly. This can help you decide whether to increase the calories you are eating.

## Problems with eating, and afterwards

### **I'm finding it difficult to get some foods down. It feels like they are sticking when I swallow**

In a small number of patients, scar tissue forms where the gullet and bowel are joined. It is simple for us to treat this - under sedation, we stretch the gullet. We usually book you in as a day-case procedure in the endoscopy department.

- If you find it difficult to swallow your food down, please tell us promptly so we can make arrangements to help you.

### **My stools look a bit odd now...**

In general, the fats in your diet are less well absorbed after the operation. You might have noticed that your stool floats more on the surface in the toilet.

- We can give you some medications to help you break down and absorb the fat better.

### **I seem to be bringing bile up into my mouth**

We call this passage of bile up the throat and into the mouth bile reflux. We take steps to avoid it happening but some patients need to take medication to keep it under control.

- Let us know if this is happening to you and we can help you out.

### **Sometimes, I have diarrhoea - should I be worried?**

There are several reasons why you might have diarrhoea after having your operation. Mostly this is to be expected and should get better with time. However, diarrhoea can lead to some of the goodness in your food not being absorbed by your body and being wasted.

- Food might just be going through your system faster.
- Dumping syndrome (see above) can also cause diarrhoea.
- During your operation, some of the nerves to the intestines (called vagus nerves) are

usually cut, which can cause unpredictable watery diarrhoea.

- If diarrhoea is a problem, you can use drugs such as Imodium or loperamide. These can be bought 'over the counter' from a pharmacist and/or prescribed from your GP.

## **Returning to work/study**

### **When can I return to work/study?**

There is no set recommended time for returning to your work/study. It will depend on your recovery and the type of work that you do.

- A good starting point is to take at least three to four months off.

### **Will I be able to return to my normal level of activity at work?**

Patients who do heavy manual labour are likely to have more problems returning to their usual work. They won't feel as strong as before. Also, they will probably find it difficult to maintain their weight when they are burning many calories working.

- If you previously had a heavy manual job, talk to your employer about changing your work to something less strenuous - especially at first.
- When you are back at work, you will need to be able to take regular breaks so you take your 'small and often' meals and snacks.
- Please don't hesitate to contact us if you need any help explaining to your employer what your future needs will be.

### **I still have some questions...**

The advice here will never be exhaustive! If you have any questions about your health etc please contact your oesophago-gastric cancer nurse specialist on 01480 364 914