

GUIDE TO POST-OPERATIVE ACTIVITY AND PHYSICAL THERAPY

Surgery recovery for NTOS decompression can be a little bit tricky. The nerve healing process can be very delicate and unpredictable. Therefore, striking a balance with restrictions and activity post-op is very important. Some people get little to no guidance from their surgeon, and if you have never had major nerve surgery before, this is not the time to learn the hard way. One of the biggest issues after this surgery is avoiding scar tissue forming around the nerves. If enough scar tissue forms around the nerves, it can compress the nerves and lead to a recurrence of TOS. One of the biggest things that can impact scar tissue formation is post-op activity. Aside from scar tissue formation, post-op activity can also delay and even prevent nerve healing. What follows is a guide to help navigate post-op life to hopefully minimize scar tissue formation and maximize safe recovery and a successful long-term surgical outcome.

Common Surgeon-Issued Post-Op Restrictions

- Out of work for 4-12 weeks (or longer depending on how physically demanding the job is)
- No lifting/pulling/pushing more than 5-10 lbs for at least 4-6 weeks
- No overhead or repetitive arm activity for at least 4-6 weeks
- No driving for 4 weeks
- Any of these restrictions could be extended for a longer period depending on how the nerves are healing

POST-OPERATIVE ACTIVITY

The Ultimate Goal

Don't do anything that consistently irritates the nerves, keeps them irritated or that consistently overworks them during recovery especially during the critical healing period of the first several months after surgery. Irritation leads to inflammation and sustained inflammation of the nerves can result in damage to the nerve which can result in scar tissue formation.

What Irritates or Overworks the Nerves?

- Repetitive tasks (typing, mousing, sorting laundry)
- Overhead tasks
- Lifting/Pushing/Pulling too much weight
- Tasks requiring a lot of fine motor skills (writing, typing, sewing, playing an instrument, gaming)
- Aggressive or inappropriate physical therapy (especially strengthening & resistance)

Tips for Safely Progressing Activity

- The first 4 weeks after surgery should only be for rest and only performing low mild tasks and passive range of motion exercises.
- Increase and progress your activity very slowly and deliberately as tolerated.
- Don't add too many new activities at once because, if you do flare, it can be difficult to know which activity caused it.
- Try an activity and wait to see how your body and your nerves respond.
- Keep in mind that nerves might not always hurt while you're performing an offending activity as there can be a delay of a day or two before a flare shows up.
- If it is actually painful during an activity, stop the activity.
- If you end up flaring from an activity, back off as you just might not be ready for it yet.
- Please note that a flareup from even one attempt at an activity can last several days or even a couple weeks and sometimes longer depending on how much the nerves got irritated. If this happens, ice, rest, and be patient to give things time to calm down.
- This can be a slow tedious process, but it is better than jeopardizing the success of your surgery.

PHYSICAL THERAPY

The Balancing Act

While physical therapy is a vital tool for post-surgical recovery, it can pose a serious risk if mishandled. TOS is highly complex, and many therapists are not properly trained in post-op TOS care. Inappropriate or aggressive therapy can severely jeopardize your surgical outcome. Clear communication about how your nerves and body are reacting to exercises is paramount, and your therapist must be willing to modify your regimen. You always have the right to pause therapy. Taking a break to protect your healing nerves will not cause damage—but pushing through inappropriate therapy absolutely can. If your therapist refuses to prioritize nerve healing, stop treatment immediately, consult your surgeon, and find a therapist who understands TOS. Protecting your recovery now prevents the chronic scar tissue that could lead you back to the operating room. Post-operative TOS recovery requires strict symptom management. Use the boundaries outlined below to proactively protect your nerves and prevent therapy-induced damage.

Physical Therapy Boundaries

- Never do anything that hurts while you're doing it - especially nerve pain/symptoms
- Never do anything that flares symptoms more than just mildly
- Never do anything that causes your symptoms to flare for longer than a few hours after PT - especially nerve symptoms. If the flare lasts into the next day or multiple days, that's not okay.
- Do not use any weights or resistance bands for several months. Strengthening is the hardest on the nerves.
- If anything hurts or causes a flare, ask your PT to modify the exercise so it doesn't hurt. If they can't modify it in a way that it doesn't hurt, you shouldn't be doing it.

