WATERFRONT
PRIVATE HOSPITAL

PATIENT INFORMATION · AFTERCARE

Abdominoplasty (Full Tummy Tuck) Aftercare

Recovery guidelines for full abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) surgery. Follow these instructions carefully to ensure proper healing and achieve optimal results. This is major surgery with a significant recovery period.

Typical recovery: 6 months for full recovery, 2–3 weeks off work · Reviewed 4 July 2026 · Version 1.0

When to get help — your traffic light guide

RED

Call 999 or go to A&E now if you have:

These can be life-threatening. Do not wait to call the hospital first.

- Sudden shortness of breath or chest pain
- Leg swelling with breathing problems (possible blood clot)
- Heavy bleeding that won't stop
- High temperature (over 38°C) with confusion or unusual drowsiness

AMBER

Contact us now — do not wait — if you have:

- Temperature over 38°C with severe pain
- One side of tummy suddenly much more swollen
- Severe pain not helped by medication

Office hours (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm): 0131 376 3785

Evenings and weekends during your early recovery: Out-of-Hours Nurse Advice Line 07405322689 — our nurse can advise you, contact your surgeon, or direct you to NHS services.

After your early recovery period: call the hospital in office hours, or NHS 24 on 111.

Had your surgery at Spire Shawfair Park (overnight stay)? Contact Spire directly using the number on your discharge paperwork — not the Waterfront advice line.

GREEN

Tell us at your next appointment:

Anything else that is niggling or worrying you — no concern is too small. Mention it at your next appointment, or call us during office hours.

Related Information Leaflets

Separate leaflets about the procedure itself — not the aftercare instructions above. Tap a title to download, or find them all on your procedure page in the portal.

- Abdominoplasty — Patient Leaflet (https://waterfront-patient-portal.netlify.app/waterfrontaftercare/abdominoplasty_patient_leaflet.pdf)

How to Use This Information

The advice below is based on Waterfront Private Hospital's written abdominoplasty aftercare information. It is general guidance for the average patient and may be adapted by your consultant for your individual circumstances.

Full tummy tuck is major surgery with a significant recovery period. The first 2 weeks are the hardest - it gets much easier after that. Be patient with your body and don't hesitate to contact us with concerns.

Always follow the specific instructions given to you on the day of your surgery. If there is ever a difference between this guide and your consultant's instructions, follow your consultant's written or verbal instructions and contact us for clarification.

Post-Operative Checklist

- Make sure you have your painkillers — the nurse looking after you will go through them with you
- Compression stockings fitted
- Follow-up nurse appointment booked (end of week 1)
- Transport home arranged
- Responsible adult staying with you first night
- Emergency contact numbers saved in phone
- Understand wound care instructions
- Belly button care explained

Wound Care

- Keep incisions dry until drains are removed
- Empty drain bulbs 2-3 times daily and record output
- After drains removed, gently clean incisions with mild soap and water
- Keep belly button clean daily with cotton bud
- Apply recommended scar cream or silicone strips after wounds dry (week 5+)
- Watch for signs of infection around incision sites
- No baths, swimming, or hot tubs until wounds fully healed (approximately 6 weeks)

Pain Management

- Take your painkillers as directed on their labels — every medicine you go home with is labelled with its dose and frequency, and your nurse will go through them with you before you leave. Paracetamol and ibuprofen can safely be taken together
- Take prescribed pain medication as directed - don't wait for pain to become severe
- Significant discomfort is expected for first week, especially when moving
- Dihydrocodeine is essential in the first week, especially if muscles were tightened
- Use cold packs on abdomen (over garment) for first 48 hours
- Walking short distances helps reduce pain and prevents blood clots
- Tightness and pulling sensations are normal
- Pain improves significantly after first week

Activity Restrictions

- Avoid heavy lifting for the first 6 weeks, then build up gradually — take it more slowly (up to about 3 months) if your muscles were tightened
- No driving for 2–3 weeks (until off pain medication and can move comfortably)
- Light walking is encouraged from day 1 to prevent blood clots
- Avoid bending, stretching, or straining for 4–6 weeks
- Return to work: 2–3 weeks for desk jobs, 6–8 weeks for physical work
- No exercise except gentle walking for 6 weeks
- No sit-ups or direct abdominal exercise for 6 weeks; if your muscles were tightened (plication), build core work back gradually from about 3 months — your surgeon will guide you at follow-up

- Gradually resume normal activities after 6 weeks with surgeon approval

Recovery at a Glance

- **Days 1–3:** Significant pain, very bent posture — Rest, strong painkillers, gentle walking
- **Days 4–7:** Still bent, improving slowly — Continue compression stockings
- **Week 1 (End):** Nurse appointment scheduled — Outer dressings removed
- **Week 2:** Less bent, still swollen — Remove paper tape, light activities
- **Weeks 3–4:** Walking more upright — Start scar care if wounds dry
- **Week 6:** Nearly normal posture — Can start gentle exercise
- **3 months:** Most swelling gone — Resume normal activities
- **6 months:** Final result — Full recovery

Before You Leave the Hospital

- **Painkillers:** Make sure you have your painkillers before you leave — the nurse looking after you will go through them with you.
- **Compression Stockings:** Fitted before discharge. These are essential for preventing blood clots — wear them day and night until you are fully mobile, for most people around 3 weeks.
- **Follow-up appointments:** You will be given a card with details of your first nurse appointment (usually end of week 1) and contact details if you have concerns once you get home.
- **Getting home safely:** You must have someone to take you home and a **responsible adult with you for the first night**.

Understanding Your Full Tummy Tuck

During your procedure, we performed:

- Excess skin from above and below belly button removed
- Abdominal muscles tightened (if separated)
- Belly button repositioned
- Liposuction to flanks if needed
- Hip-to-hip scar plus scar around belly button
- This is more extensive than a mini tummy tuck and recovery takes longer.

Your Painkillers

Every medicine you go home with is clearly labelled with its dose and how often to take it, and your nurse will go through your painkillers with you before you leave.

Take them as directed on the label. Paracetamol and ibuprofen can safely be taken together. If your pain isn't controlled despite taking your painkillers as directed, contact us.

Compression Stockings and Garments

Compression Stockings (REQUIRED)

- Wear day and night until you are fully mobile — for most people around 3 weeks
- They matter most while you are less mobile than usual
- Prevents blood clots
- Fine to remove for washing
- **Compression Garments (OPTIONAL)**
- Not required - no proven benefit and may increase DVT risk if too tight.
- If you choose to wear one, it must not be tight or restrictive and should feel comfortable. Stop if causing discomfort.
- Your compression garment should have:
- High waist support
- Adjustable closures (hooks or velcro)
- Breathable fabric
- Comfortable fit (firm but not painful)
- Available online from Lipoelastic (https://www.lipoelastic.co.uk) or Macom (https://www.macom-medical.com) (use code QUABA for discount), or department stores like M&S, Tesco, Asda.

Belly Button Care

Your belly button has been repositioned and needs special care throughout your recovery.

Daily Routine

- Clean with cotton bud
- Use warm soapy water
- Remove any crusting gently
- Pat dry thoroughly

- Check for signs of infection
- **Watch For**
- Redness spreading
- Smelly discharge
- Increasing pain

Scar Care

Your Scars

- Hip-to-hip horizontal scar
- Circular scar around belly button
- Usually hidden by underwear
- **When to Start (Week 5):** Only start scar care when wounds are completely healed.
- **Scar Care Routine**
- **Step 1: Apply Micropore Tape** — Use 3M micropore tape from pharmacy; Leave on 3–5 days; Can shower with it on
- **Step 2: Remove and Moisturise** — Use plain moisturiser (E45, Aveeno, Bio-Oil); Leave exposed 1–2 days
- **Step 3: Repeat Cycle** — Continue for 4+ months. Stop tape if irritation occurs.
- **Scar Timeline**
- **3 months:** Scars still pink/red
- **6 months:** Significant fading
- **12 months:** Final appearance

Activity Resume Timeline

- **Showering:** Day 1 — Pat dry carefully
- **Driving:** Weeks 2–3 — When comfortable with emergency stop
- **Office work:** Weeks 2–3 — When can sit comfortably
- **Physical work:** Weeks 3–4 — No heavy lifting
- **Walking exercise:** Week 2 — Build very gradually
- **Light exercise:** Week 6 — Start gently
- **Running/cycling:** Week 6 — If muscles not tightened
- **Swimming:** Once wounds are fully healed — usually around 6 weeks
- **Heavy lifting (over 10kg):** 3 months — 6 months if muscles tightened
- **Sit-ups/abs exercises:** 6 months — Especially if muscles tightened

- **Flying (short):** 2 weeks — Under 3 hours
- **Flying (long-haul):** About 4 weeks — UK guidance after surgery; keep hydrated, move regularly, wear flight socks. Flying sooner? Discuss it with us first

Lifestyle Guidelines

✓ **DO**

- Walk regularly but stay bent initially
- Wear compression stockings until you are fully mobile (for most people around 3 weeks)
- Many patients find sleeping propped up on a couple of pillows (or in a recliner) most comfortable at first
- Keep belly button clean daily
- Eat high-fibre foods
- Take laxatives preventatively
- Be patient - recovery is slow
- Listen to your body
- ***✗* AVOID**
- Smoking or vaping nicotine for at least 4 weeks
- Alcohol for 3 weeks
- Heavy lifting for 3 months
- Forcing upright posture early
- Straining when using toilet
- Sit-ups for 6 months
- Swimming until wounds are fully healed (usually around 6 weeks)

Understanding Your Results

Swelling Timeline

- **Weeks 1–2:** Maximum swelling
- **Month 1:** 50% reduced
- **Month 3:** 80% reduced
- **Month 6:** Final result
- **Normal Experiences**
- Tummy feels hard and swollen
- Worse swelling in evenings

- Morning appearance most accurate
- Numbness from belly button to scar
- "Pins and needles" as nerves heal
- Shooting pains (nerves reconnecting)

Exercise Recovery

If Muscles NOT Tightened

- **Week 6:** Walking, light cardio
- **Week 8:** Gentle gym work
- **Month 3:** Full activities
- **If Muscles WERE Tightened**
- **Week 6:** Walking only
- **Month 3:** Light exercise
- **Month 6:** Full activities including abs

Your Recovery, Stage by Stage

Days 1–3 — Early Recovery

Immediate post-surgery care and intensive management

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Significant pain and tightness
- Very bent when walking (like sitting in invisible chair)
- Extensive swelling
- Bruising, especially at sides
- Blood spots on dressings
- Difficulty getting in/out of bed
- Mood changes

CARE ROUTINE

- Take strong painkillers regularly
- Wear your compression stockings day and night
- Walk bent over - don't force straight posture
- Walk around home every 2–3 hours
- Many patients find sleeping propped up on a couple of pillows (or in a recliner) most comfortable at first

- Shower carefully (OK if outer dressings get wet)
- Get out of bed: roll onto side, use arms to push up, swing legs down, stand slowly while staying bent

COMFORT

- Take painkillers on schedule (don't wait for pain)
- Use cold packs on abdomen (over garment) for first 48 hours
- Report uncontrolled pain immediately

Days 4–7 — Gradual Progress

Pain becoming more manageable, gradual improvement

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Pain more manageable
- Still very bent when walking
- Swelling peaks then stabilizes
- More energy each day

CARE ROUTINE

- Continue compression stockings
- Increase walking distances gradually
- Keep belly button clean with cotton bud
- Stay bent - don't force upright position
- Continue taking medications regularly
- Attend first nurse appointment (usually end of week 1)

COMFORT

- Pain should be more manageable
- Continue strong painkillers as prescribed
- Transition to regular pain relief if possible
- Walking helps reduce pain and prevents blood clots

Week 2 — Slow Improvement

Standing straighter, pain decreasing significantly

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Starting to stand slightly straighter
- Pain decreasing significantly
- Bruising fading
- Still very swollen
- May return to desk work end of week

CARE ROUTINE

- Remove paper tape by end of week 2 (apply Vaseline if stuck)
- Glue tape stays until week 3
- Continue avoiding heavy lifting
- Increase light activities gradually
- Begin gentle mobility exercises
- Continue compression stockings

COMFORT

- Pain decreasing significantly
- May reduce medication frequency
- Still need painkillers for activity

Weeks 3–4 — Turning Point

Walking more upright, most bruising gone

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Walking more upright daily
- Most bruising gone
- Swelling reducing
- Feeling more human
- Can moisturise scars if dry

CARE ROUTINE

- Continue avoiding heavy lifting
- Can moisturise scars if wounds dry
- Increase walking activities
- Begin light scar care routine
- Continue compression stockings if recommended
- Return to more normal activities gradually

COMFORT

- Minimal pain medication needed
- Most discomfort resolved
- Can manage with regular painkillers as needed

Week 6 — Nearly Normal

Nearly normal posture, can start gentle exercise

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Nearly normal posture

- Most bruising completely resolved
- Significant swelling reduction
- Feeling much more normal

CARE ROUTINE

- Can start gentle exercise with approval
- Continue scar care (tape and moisturising)
- Normal activities mostly resumed
- Follow-up appointment around week 6
- Continue protective activities

COMFORT

- No pain medication typically needed
- Occasional mild discomfort possible
- Full range of motion restored

Month 3 — Most Swelling Gone

Most swelling resolved, can resume normal activities

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Most swelling gone
- Final results becoming visible
- Scars significantly faded
- Feeling completely normal

CARE ROUTINE

- Resume normal activities
- Heavy lifting (over 10kg) now permitted
- Continue sun protection on scars
- Can resume swimming
- Full exercise programme with approval

COMFORT

- No pain expected
- Full recovery achieved
- Contact team if any concerns arise

Month 6 — Final Result

Optimal healing achieved

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Final results visible

- Scars well-healed and faded
- Complete return to all activities
- Confident with appearance

CARE ROUTINE

- All activities permitted
- Regular exercise including abdominal work
- Continue long-term care as advised
- Annual check-ups as recommended

COMFORT

- No pain expected
- Full recovery achieved
- Contact team if any concerns arise

Follow-Up Appointments

Week 1 (Days 7–10) — First post-operative nurse appointment to check healing and wound progress.

- Outer dressings removed
- Wounds checked
- Paper tape (steri-strips) or glue tape left on
- Belly button stitches removed
- Questions answered

Further nurse reviews — as needed — Some patients need further nurse reviews. If so, the nurses will arrange these with you and will discharge you from nurse-led care once they are happy your wounds have healed.

Around 6 months — surgeon review (final follow-up) — Your surgeon will usually see you at around 6 months to assess your final result. Your surgeon is always available to review you sooner if required, and in some circumstances may wish to see you before your final follow-up.

Your appointment schedule may vary. Always follow the specific dates and times given in your appointment card. Contact us if you need to reschedule.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why am I so bent over?

The skin has been pulled tight. Standing straight too early can damage the repair. Your body naturally protects itself by keeping you bent. Without muscle tightening: 2–3 weeks. With muscle tightening: 3–4 weeks or longer.

When will I stand normally?

Most patients stand straighter by weeks 2–3 if muscles weren't tightened. If muscles were tightened (plication), it may take 3–4 weeks or longer. Don't force it - let your body guide the process.

Why does my tummy feel so hard?

Swelling creates firmness in the abdomen. This is completely normal and will soften gradually over 3–6 months as the swelling reduces.

Is the numbness permanent?

No, numbness is temporary. It takes 6–12 months for full sensation to return. Some areas may always feel slightly different, which is normal.

When can I sleep on my stomach?

Whenever it's comfortable — there's no strict rule. After a tummy tuck that's usually a few weeks away simply because of the tightness. Many patients find sleeping propped up on a couple of pillows most comfortable at first.

Why is my swelling worse at night?

Fluid accumulates during the day. Morning appearance shows your true progress. This is completely normal.

Can I wear normal clothes?

Wear loose clothing for 3–4 weeks. You can transition to normal clothes as swelling reduces.

Can I have lymphatic massage?

Yes, we have no objections if you wish to arrange this yourself. Many patients find it helpful for reducing swelling after tummy tuck. Wait until after your first nurse appointment (week 1) and ensure your therapist is qualified and experienced with post-surgical massage.