Preventing Blood Clots After Surgery

After surgery, you have a higher chance of getting a blood clot in a deep vein, usually in the leg. This is called **deep vein thrombosis (DVT)**. A piece of the clot can travel to the lungs. This is called a **pulmonary embolism (PE)** and can be deadly. Most clots can be prevented.

Risk Factors

- Having surgery or staying in the hospital
- Not moving for a long time (bed rest, long trips)
- Being older
- Being overweight
- A family history of blood clots
- Cancer now or in the past
- Being pregnant or just having a baby
- Birth control pills or hormone therapy with estrogen
- An injury, such as a broken bone

Signs and Symptoms to Report to Your Nurse

In your leg or arm (DVT):

- Swelling
- Pain or tenderness
- Red or warm skin

In your lungs (PE):

- Trouble breathing
- Fast or uneven heartbeat
- Chest pain that is worse when you breathe deeply or cough
- Coughing up blood
- Feeling dizzy or fainting

Trouble breathing or chest pain? Press your call light now. At home, call 911.

Actions Your Nurse Might Perform to Prevent a Clot

- Help you get out of bed and walk soon after surgery, several times a day
- Teach you leg exercises in bed: point and flex your feet and circle your ankles 10 times every hour while awake
- Put special sleeves on your legs that squeeze and relax to keep blood moving (compression devices)
- Give a blood thinner shot or pill, if your doctor orders it
- Encourage you to drink fluids, if allowed
- Check your legs and breathing and ask how you feel

What You Can Do

- Walk as soon and as often as your care team says it is safe
- Keep the leg sleeves on when you are in bed
- Take blood thinners exactly as prescribed, even at home
- Do not cross your legs or sit still for long periods
- Tell your nurse if you had a blood clot before
- Keep watching for signs for several weeks after you go home

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, May 15). *Know the risks, signs & symptoms of blood clots*. https://www.cdc.gov/blood-clots/toolkit/know-the-risks.html

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, January 27). *Data and statistics on venous thromboembolism*. https://www.cdc.gov/blood-clots/data-research/facts-stats/index.html