

POSTOPERATIVE CARE

Postoperative care is the phase of perioperative care that begins at the point when the patient enters the PACU (post-anesthesia care unit) until they have recovered sufficiently to be transferred from the PACU and into the appropriate recovering unit or discharged home.

PHASE 1

Phase 1 is the immediate post-anesthesia period, when the patient is emerging from anesthesia and requires one-on-one care. The PACU nurse assesses the patient's level of consciousness, breath sounds, respiratory effort, oxygen saturation, blood pressure, cardiac rhythm, and muscle strength. During this phase, the patient is being prepared for transfer to phase 2, or transfer to an ICU or inpatient nursing unit.

PHASE 2

Phase 2 is continued recovery, when the patient's consciousness returns to baseline and the patient has stable respiratory, cardiac, and renal functioning. Many patients bypass phase 1 and go directly from the OR to phase 2 in a process known as fast-tracking. The patient then moves to phase 3, home, or an extended care facility.

PHASE 3

Phase 3 is ongoing care for patients needing extended observation and interventions after phase 1 or 2, such as a 24-hour observation unit or an in-hospital unit. Nursing care continues until the patient completely recovers from anesthesia and surgery, and is ready for self-care.

Interventions

- Monitoring vital signs, airway patency, and neurologic status
- Monitoring for possible complications
- Assessing and managing pain
- Assessing the surgical site (if relevant)
- Assessing and maintaining fluid and electrolyte balance
- Providing a thorough report of the patient's status to the receiving nurse on the recovery unit, as well as the patient's family

Complications

- **Respiratory:** Hypoxemia, aspiration, and laryngospasm
- **Cardiac:** Hypotension, hypertension, and dysrhythmias
- **Thermoregulatory:** Hypothermia or hyperthermia
- **Gastrointestinal:** Nausea and/or vomiting
- **Neurologic:** Delayed emergence from anesthesia, issues with circulation and sensation, and delirium or aggression
- **Additional complications:** Pain, surgical site complications, fluid management, and patient safety

