PEAK LIFE

POST-OP RECOVERY 12 · THE 12 WEEK PROGRAMME

Recover. Rebuild. Return.

A gentle, phased return to training after major abdominal or keyhole surgery. Phases 1 to 3, weeks 4 to 12.

Every exercise has a QR code. Scan it with your phone camera to watch the movement.

Prepared by Jake Avery | Peak Life · v1.0

Based on an NHS physiotherapy leaflet. This is not medical advice. Please read the next page before you begin.

BEFORE YOU START

Please read this first

This programme was written for one person, not for you

I built this for a specific one to one client I am coaching in person through her recovery from keyhole abdominal surgery. Every weight, rep and progression here is judged against how she is doing week to week, in front of me.

I cannot recommend this to you, because I am not coaching you and I have not assessed you. Please treat it as an example of how a careful return might be structured, something to read, research and take to your own surgical team and physio, not a plan to simply copy.

I take no responsibility for any injury, harm, setback or complication that comes from using this programme. You use it entirely at your own risk.

Where the clinical guidance comes from

This programme is built on the NHS patient information leaflet *Recovering from Major Abdominal Surgery: physiotherapy advice and exercise guide*, published by the Physiotherapy Department, Surgical Therapy Team, York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. Reference PIL 1119 v3, issued June 2024. Copyright remains with the Trust.

I did not write the clinical guidance and I cannot change it. What I have done is take its phases and safety rules and build a gym and home programme around them. It is not endorsed by, or affiliated with, the Trust or the NHS. Where the two differ, the NHS leaflet is correct. The full leaflet QR code is on the last page.

Please understand

- Your surgical team, GP and physiotherapist overrule everything in here. If their advice differs, follow theirs.
- Get cleared by your surgical team before you start, and get any lifting limit confirmed rather than assumed.
- Peak Life is a coaching service, not a medical or physiotherapy service. Nothing here is medical advice or a clinical assessment.
- Timings are a rough guide. Your surgery and your recovery may be very different. Moving between phases is based on how you are healing, not the date in the diary.
- If in doubt, do less. Nothing here is urgent and nothing is worth a setback.

The three rules that sit above everything

Exercise may feel uncomfortable. It should never feel painful.

Never hold your breath during any exercise.

Do not exercise on a day you feel unwell.

THE SHAPE OF IT

How the programme works

Recovery runs in phases and each phase has one job. You do the daily set every single day, right the way through. The gym or home sessions sit on top of it, two a week, and only start once your team is happy for you to load.

Phase	Roughly when	The job
Daily set	Every day, from day one	Breathing and deep core work, twice a day. The engine of the whole recovery.
1 · Recover	Weeks 4 to 8	Breathing, gentle range, deep muscles switched back on. Nothing loaded.
2 · Rebuild	Weeks 8 to 10	First light weights for the upper body. Legs stay bodyweight. Still no loaded tummy work beyond the dead bug.
3 · Return	Weeks 10 to 12	First real core work and first weight through the legs. Small steps, one change at a time.

How to run a week

The daily set happens twice every day. On top of that, aim for two sessions a week, alternating Session A and Session B for whichever phase you are in. Leave a day between sessions and never train through tiredness or pain.

How to use the QR codes

Open your phone camera and point it at the QR code next to any exercise. A link to a short demo video will pop up. No app needed. If a code will not scan, move a little further back and make sure the page is well lit.

Feeling normal is not the same as being healed. The abdominal wall keeps rebuilding for up to two years, so the daily core work carries on long after you feel fine.

EVERY DAY

The Daily Set

Twice a day, every day

Coach's note. Daily programme. Five minutes, twice a day, every day. This is the most important part of your recovery and it does more for you than the gym sessions do. Breathe normally throughout and never hold your breath. It may feel uncomfortable. It should never feel painful. If it does, stop and tell me.

GIANT SET, ONE SET OF EACH

Scan to watch

Supine Drawing In

3 to 5 reps

Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. You should not be holding your breath, though.

Scan to watch

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.

Scan to watch

Knee Rolling

3 to 5 reps each side

Three to five each side. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. You should not be holding your breath, though.

Scan to watch

Pelvic Floor Squeezing

3 to 5 reps

Hold for up to 10 seconds. You should not be holding your breath, though.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

10 to 15 minutes

Build this up over time towards 30 minutes as you move into Phase 2.

PHASE 1 · RECOVER

Session A

Weeks 4 to 8 post op

Coach's note. This session is about breathing, gentle range and getting the deep muscles switched back on. Nothing here should feel like effort. Aim for 4 out of 10 and finish feeling better than you started. If anything pulls or nips, stop that exercise and move on. Rest as long as you like between everything.

GIANT SET 1

Scan to watch

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

3 sets · 3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.

Scan to watch

Seated Deep Breathing, Hands on Lower Ribs

3 sets · 4 breaths

4 breaths.

Scan to watch

Deep Abdominal Breathing

3 sets · 5 reps

5 seconds in, 5 seconds out.

Scan to watch

Pelvic Tilt + Breath

2 sets · 5 reps

Hold for 5 to 10 seconds in each rotation.

GIANT SET 2

Scan to watch

Knee Rolling

2 sets · 5 reps

Five each side.

Scan to watch

Heel Slide Supine

2 sets · 8 reps

Eight on each leg.

Scan to watch

Scapula Retractions

2 sets · 10 reps

Scan to watch

All Slides with Progression

2 sets · 30 to 60 secs

30 to 60 seconds, keep the core engaged.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

10 to 15 minutes

Keep building towards 30 minutes as you move into Phase 2.

PHASE 1 · RECOVER

Session B

Weeks 4 to 8 post op

Coach's note. Same idea as Session A, just more upright. Keep a hand on something solid for anything standing. Small range on the squat, slow and controlled, no rush. If you feel tired before the end, stop where you are. Finishing early is not a failed session. The walk at the end matters as much as anything before it.

GIANT SET 1

Scan to watch

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

3 sets · 3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.

Scan to watch

Seated Deep Breathing, Hands on Lower Ribs

3 sets · 4 breaths

4 breaths.

Scan to watch

Pelvic Floor Squeezing

3 sets · 5 reps

Scan to watch

Seated Knee March

2 sets · 30 secs

30 seconds on this, do not rush.

Scan to watch

Supported Standing Knee Marching

2 sets · 30 secs

30 seconds.

GIANT SET 2

Scan to watch

Supported Quarter Squat, Slow and Controlled

2 sets · 8 reps

Scan to watch

Supported Heel Raise

2 sets · 10 reps

Scan to watch

Cat Cow

2 sets · 8 reps

Do this in a shorter range. Do not go to the full end ranges.

Scan to watch

Supine Hamstring Stretch with Strap

2 sets · 30 secs

30 seconds each leg.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

10 to 15 minutes

Keep building towards 30 minutes as you move into Phase 2.

PHASE 2 · REBUILD

Session A

Weeks 8 to 10

Coach's note. First session with weights. Everything stays light on purpose. Breathe out as you press, every rep, and never hold your breath. The dead bug is the first proper tummy exercise you have done, so watch for any bulging or ridging down your middle. If you see it, stop the set and tell me. Legs stay bodyweight this phase.

GIANT SET

Scan to watch

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

2 sets · 3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.

Scan to watch

Seated Deep Breathing, Hands on Lower Ribs

2 sets · 4 breaths

4 breaths.

Scan to watch

Deep Abdominal Breathing

2 sets · 5 reps

5 seconds in, 5 seconds out.

SUPERSET 1

Scan to watch

Dumbbell Shoulder Press

2 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Back fully against the seat. Only about 2 to 3 kg max. Drive straight up, control the way down to just below shoulder height.

Scan to watch

KB Front Rack Squat, to 90 Degree Box

2 sets · 10 to 12 reps

NO WEIGHT. Elevate the heels as needed for a good squat, pelvis stays neutral throughout.

SUPERSET 2

Scan to watch

Chest Supported Seated Machine Row

2 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Depending on the machine, but it should be less than 20 to 30 percent of what you could do before.

Scan to watch

Hip Thrust, Bodyweight or DB

2 sets · 30 to 60 secs

Around 30 to 60 seconds. No holding at the top.

SUPERSET 3

Scan to watch

Chest Flye

2 sets · 10 to 12 reps

Keep the ribs down. Do not worry too much about depth. Keep the ribs down and core engaged. D handles if you can.

Scan to watch

Deadbug

2 sets · 8 reps

Keep the lower back fixed to the floor. The moment the ribs flare and it lifts off, that is your limit. Work to it, then improve on it.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

20 minutes

Keep building towards 30 minutes.

PHASE 2 · REBUILD

Session B

Weeks 8 to 10

Coach's note. Light arms and supported legs. If you find yourself gripping your tummy to lift the weight, it is too heavy, whatever the number on it says. Keep a hand on the rail for step ups. Check in the morning after: if you are more tired than the day before, we pull it back next session.

GIANT SET

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

Scan to watch

1 set · 3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.

Seated Deep Breathing, Hands on Lower Ribs

Scan to watch

2 sets · 4 breaths

4 breaths.

Pelvic Floor Squeezing

Scan to watch

2 sets · 5 reps

Hold up to 10 seconds.

SUPERSET 1

Press Up onto Bench

Scan to watch

2 sets · 8 to 10 reps

If this feels too much on your wrists or shoulders, raise the box higher.

Incline Hammer Curl

Scan to watch

2 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Only 2 to 3 kg.

SUPERSET 2

Step Up onto Low Box

Scan to watch

2 sets · 8 to 10 reps each leg

8 to 10 each leg. Make sure you are holding on.

Bilateral DB Lateral Raise

Scan to watch

2 sets · 12 to 15 reps

1 to 2 kg.

SUPERSET 3

Scan to watch

Sidelying Clamshell

2 sets · 12 to 15 reps each leg

Twelve to fifteen on each leg.

Scan to watch

Supine Hamstring Stretch with Strap

2 sets · 30 secs

30 seconds each leg, or until you feel it relax.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

20 minutes

Keep building towards 30 minutes.

PHASE 3 · RETURN

Session A

Weeks 10 to 12

Coach's note. Twelve weeks on and you have earned this one. First real core work and first weight through your legs. Go up slowly. Your tummy will feel able before it is fully strong underneath, so we build in small steps rather than big ones. Watch for any bulge, dragging or scar ache the next day and tell me if you get one.

GIANT SET

Scan to watch

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

1 set · 3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.

Scan to watch

Seated Deep Breathing, Hands on Lower Ribs

2 sets · 4 breaths

4 breaths.

Scan to watch

Deep Abdominal Breathing

2 sets · 5 reps

5 seconds in, 5 seconds out.

SUPERSET 1

Scan to watch

Dumbbell Shoulder Press

3 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Back fully against the seat. Weight can go up by 1 kg at a time across these two weeks, compared to Phase 2.

Scan to watch

KB Front Rack Squat, to 90 Degree Box

2 sets · 10 to 12 reps

NO WEIGHT.

SUPERSET 2

Scan to watch

Chest Supported Seated Machine Row

3 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Less than 20 to 30 percent of what you could do before. Weight can go up by 1 kg at a time across these two weeks.

Scan to watch

Hip Thrust, Bodyweight or DB

2 sets · 30 to 60 secs

You can hold at the top for 2 seconds on this. 30 to 60 seconds.

SUPERSET 3

Scan to watch

Chest Flye

3 sets · 10 to 12 reps

Keep the ribs down and core engaged. Weight can go up by 1 kg at a time across these two weeks.

Scan to watch

Deadbug

2 sets · 8 reps each side

Up to 8 each side. Single leg slide out and back. Add the arms too if it is feeling good.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

25 to 30 minutes

PHASE 3 · RETURN

Session B

Weeks 10 to 12

Coach's note. Loaded legs and carries. Keep breathing throughout, especially under load. Nothing should ever be heavy enough that you need to brace hard to lift it. If a weight makes you hold your breath, drop it. Progress here is one rep at a time, not one plate at a time. Slow is the point.

GIANT SET



Scan to watch

90/90 Hip Lift with Active Ball Squeeze

2 sets · 3 to 5 reps

5 second breath in, 5 second breath out = 1 rep. You do not need to hold your breath, it should be consistent.



Scan to watch

Seated Deep Breathing, Hands on Lower Ribs

2 sets · 4 breaths

4 breaths.



Scan to watch

Pelvic Floor Squeezing

2 sets · 5 reps

SUPERSET 1



Scan to watch

Press Up onto Bench

3 sets · 8 to 10 reps

If this feels too much, raise the box higher.



Scan to watch

Incline Hammer Curl

3 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Weight can go up by 1 kg at a time across these two weeks, compared to Phase 2.

SUPERSET 2



Scan to watch

Step Up onto Low Box

2 sets · 8 to 10 reps each leg

8 to 10 each leg. Make sure you are holding on. You can raise the step a few inches now to add difficulty.



Scan to watch

Bilateral DB Lateral Raise

3 sets · 12 to 15 reps

Weight can go up by 1 kg at a time across these two weeks.

SUPERSET 3



Scan to watch

Sidelying Clamshell

2 sets · 12 to 15 reps each leg

Twelve to fifteen on each leg.



Scan to watch

Supine Hamstring Stretch with Strap

2 sets · 30 secs

30 seconds each leg, or until you feel it relax.

THEN WALK

No video

Walking

20 to 30 minutes

KNOW WHEN TO STOP

Warning signs and stop rules

Stop and speak to your GP or surgical team if you notice

- Pain, rather than mild discomfort, during or after exercise.
- A bulge, lump or dragging feeling at any scar or keyhole site.
- Pain that is still there the next day rather than settling.
- Blood in your urine, or a change in bowel habit after exercising.
- Leaking or urgency that you did not have before.
- Feeling generally unwell.

General rules for every session

- Exercise should not cause pain, though some discomfort is normal.
- Do not exercise if you feel unwell or you are in pain.
- Start gently and progress only as you feel comfortable.
- Never hold your breath during any exercise.
- Keep hydrated.
- Do not compare yourself with anyone else.
- Judge a session by how you feel the next morning.
- Ask your surgeon what counts as enough, and too much, for you.

Read the full NHS leaflet

Recovering from Major Abdominal Surgery: physiotherapy advice and exercise guide for patients, relatives and carers. York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Physiotherapy Department, Surgical Therapy Team. Reference PIL 1119 v3, issued June 2024, review June 2027. Copyright York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, all rights reserved.

Scan the code to open the Trust's patient information leaflet library, then search for "abdominal surgery". This Peak Life programme is built on that leaflet and is not endorsed by or affiliated with the Trust or the NHS.

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