

# Pain after surgery: What to expect as you recover at home



## **What can I expect from my pain after surgery?**

Pain after surgery is normal. It usually gets much better in a few days. Depending on the surgery, it may not go away completely for weeks or even months. If you have sudden, spreading pain that does not go away, tell your doctor.

## **Why is it important to treat my pain after surgery?**

Pain relief is important. It will help you feel more comfortable, move better, and heal faster. The goal is pain you can manage, not zero pain. You should be able to do the activities advised by your doctor.

## **How can I help my pain after surgery?**

Your care team will work with you to manage your pain after surgery. Your doctor aims to balance helping your pain without possible harm from treatments. You may be offered a combination of medicines and non-drug treatments to help your pain.

## **How should I take my pain medicines?**

The most common way to treat pain after surgery is with pain medicine. The goal is to lower pain to a level where you can do needed activities. Follow your doctor's advice about how to take your medicine. You may be told to do any of these things:

- Take medicine on a set schedule to keep steady levels in your system.
- Take medicine before starting an activity, like physical therapy.
- Use less of the strong medicine by using milder medicines and non-drug treatments first. Stronger medicines have more side effects.
- Adjust the dose down as your pain gets better.

Follow these safety tips to avoid harm from medicines

- Take your pain medicine exactly as you are told. Follow the directions on the label.
- Never take a higher dose or a dose more often than instructed.

**Talk to your doctor if you need something more or different for pain.**

## **Three Types of Pain Medicines**

You may be told to take more than one type of pain medicine. Taking lower doses of two or three different types of pain medicines can work better than taking a lot of one type of medicine. There may be fewer side effects too.

Three types of pain medicines (continued from page 1)

**1. Over-the-counter pain medicines**

Milder medicines include Tylenol, Ibuprofen, or Aleve that you can buy in a store.

**2. Non-opioid prescription pain medicines**

Medicines that quiet pain nerves include lidocaine, gabapentin, duloxetine, and tizanidine. They work better over time when taken as directed.

**3. Opioid pain medicines**

Opioids are strong medicines. They can be helpful after surgery for strong pain. Some opioids used after surgery include morphine, hydromorphone, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and tramadol. The longer opioids are used, the bigger chance they will cause side effects. They may stop working as well as they did at the beginning.

## **Non-drug methods to help with pain after surgery**

Follow your doctor's advice. Some non-drug methods may not be used after your surgery.

### **Non-drug methods that target the body**

- Cooling or heating the painful area. Check with your doctor about using cold or heat.
  - Cold packs are better the first few days after surgery. They help with pain and swelling.
  - Heat helps with pain, spasms, and blood flow.
- Keep active. Follow the activity advice from your doctor or physical therapist.
- Change your position regularly. Find comfortable positions.
- Eat well, get enough sleep, and get fresh air.

### **Non-drug methods that target the mind**

- Try to find the right balance when thinking about your recovery.
  - Being too optimistic, you may do too much too soon.
  - Being pessimistic, you may have more pain, worry, or a sense of hopelessness.
- Practice simple relaxation and stress reduction techniques. Try this:
  - Focus on your breathing. Relax your jaw and other muscles.
  - Use meditation or imagery to focus your mind and relax your body. There are apps on Calm.com that can help you with this.
- Use distraction. Try doing activities that bring your focus to other things you enjoy like reading, listening to music, doing puzzles, watching TV, prayer, or talking with friends.
- Let go of strong emotions and upsetting thoughts.

If you want to watch a video of this information, you can copy and paste the link below in a web browser:

<https://link.videoplatform.limelight.com/media/?mediaId=127dd00372f14550b717f5803a9efc4a&width=1280&height=720&playerForm=d2511832a8284c5e95f589215879df1d&embedMode=html&htmlPlayerFilename=limelightjs-player.js&orgid=bda66164e3b2473baaab57187cec393d>

**This information is for all Mass General Brigham surgical patients. Please follow any specific advice you get from your doctor. If you have any questions about your pain as you recover, call your doctor.**