

Managing pain after surgery

What you need to know



Talk with your doctors and nurses

You will likely feel some pain after surgery. Your doctors and nurses may not be able to stop your pain, but they can help control it. If you are in pain, tell them right away. That way, they can start to manage your pain before it gets worse.

Before your surgery, ask how your pain will be treated. Also ask about side effects from pain medication. If you think you're feeling side effects from pain medication, tell your doctors or nurses right away.

There are many different types of pain medications. If you feel like your pain medication isn't working, ask your doctors or nurses about other options. There are also ways to help manage pain without drugs, such as changing your position or elevating your arms or legs.

When you're in pain, tell your doctors or nurses:

- Where it hurts.
- How much it hurts.
- What has helped to relieve this type of pain in the past.

Ask about steps you can take to help manage your pain once you leave the hospital.

After you leave the hospital

You may still need medications to manage pain once you get home. Ask your doctors about the benefits and risks with taking your pain medications. Also ask your doctors or nurses about the proper way to store or dispose of any leftover medication.



If your pain gets worse

Your pain may come and go during your hospital stay. As your pain medication starts to wear off, your pain may get worse or you may feel new pain. You may also feel pain during activities like walking, moving suddenly, or coughing.

If your pain gets worse, tell your doctors and nurses right away. They will check your pain and decide how to help relieve it.

When you feel pain, speak up. The more your doctors and nurses know about it, the better they can manage it. Always let them know:

- How much pain you are having.
- Where you feel it.
- If the pain is getting better or worse.
- What has helped to relieve this type of pain in the past.

If you have side effects

Pain medications may cause side effects. Below are a few of the side effects caused by some common pain medications. Some of these side effects may be serious. Tell your doctors or nurses right away if you think you are having any side effects after taking pain medication.

- Sleepiness
- Dizziness
- Feeling sick to your stomach
- Vomiting
- Confusion
- Constipation

Hospital staff will check with you regularly to make sure your pain is being controlled. They will also help you manage any side effects.



Help your doctors and nurses understand the **kind** of pain you have and **how strong** the pain is. This will help them provide better pain relief. These words may help you describe your pain:

- Aching
- Cold
- Blunt
- Sore
- Dull
- Off and on
- Nagging
- Pins and needles
- Stinging
- Constant
- Biting
- Burning
- Hot
- Cutting
- Spreading from one place to another
- Making me sick to my stomach
- Intense
- Piercing
- Sharp
- Shooting
- Stabbing
- Throbbing

Measuring pain

Your doctors and nurses will make a pain relief plan that's right for you. The plan will be based on the kind of surgery you've had and what you will need to recover.

The hospital staff will check your pain, from the time you arrive at the hospital until you are sent home. They may ask you to rate your pain using a pain scale. Pain scales allow you to rate your pain using numbers or pictures. This can help your doctors or nurses know how severe your pain is.

Recovering after surgery

Your doctors will work with you to determine your recovery goals. These are small actions you can take as you recover from surgery. Examples include:

- Turning over in bed.
- Coughing and breathing deeply.
- Sitting up in bed.
- Moving to a chair.
- Walking distances recommended by your doctors.

Hospital staff will manage your pain to help you meet your recovery goals. If a goal is to be able to breathe deeply, your doctors and nurses will try to make sure that your pain doesn't prevent that.

Treating your pain

You may be given several different pain medications after surgery. This approach is called multimodal pain control. It helps reduce the pain you feel right after surgery (acute pain) and can lessen side effects from some pain medications. Your doctors or nurses may take the following steps to use multimodal pain control:

Step 1: After surgery, your doctors or nurses may give you a non-opioid pain reliever. Examples include products like ibuprofen and acetaminophen.

Step 2: If your pain continues, or if it gets worse, your doctors or nurses may add an opioid (such as morphine) for pain relief.

Step 3: If your pain continues to get worse, your doctors or nurses may increase the dose of your opioid.

Following surgery, medication for acute pain is usually given through an intravenous (IV) line (into a vein). Your doctors will decide when to switch to a pain medication that you can take by mouth. To help lessen side effects such as constipation, it's important to follow your doctors' directions about drinking fluids and increasing your activity level.

Options for managing pain without drugs

Ask your doctors or nurses how these methods may help you cope with pain or reduce stress:

- Meditating
- Listening to soothing music
- Using controlled breathing or relaxation techniques
- Changing your position
- Elevating your arms or legs
- Increasing your activity level



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