



Managing pain after surgery

Pain after surgery is normal. It's a part of recovery, gets better in a few days, and goes away with treatment and healing.

Pain medication. Pain medicine is commonly used after surgery to manage pain. The goal of medication is not zero pain but to manage pain to a level where you can move and be active, heal, and recover.

Be sure to follow your doctor's advice about how to take your medicine, which may include:

- Over the counter (OTC) analgesics like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin). Typically used as the starting point of pain management post-surgery.
- Short-term prescription opioids, like codeine, hydromorphone, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and tramadol. Typically designed for use with pain not managed well with OTC medicine and non-medical strategies.
- Non-opioid prescriptions like gabapentin, pregabalin, and steroids. Typically used to supplement other pain management strategies.

If your doctor prescribes opioids, use them wisely. Opioids are strong medicines that can have significant side effects. They may even stop working as well as they did and increase the amount of pain you feel the longer you use them.

Take medicine on schedule to stay ahead of the pain and not wait until the pain is severe to take medicine. And taper medications slowly over time as you can tolerate the pain with the guidance of your doctor.

Distract yourself. Try doing things that distract you from the pain and help you focus on what you enjoy. Listen to music, do a puzzle, watch a comedy, or have coffee with a friend.

Change thoughts to change pain. Your thoughts are powerful. Challenge and reframe any unhelpful thoughts with more helpful thoughts – letting go of intense emotions like fear and anxiety and unhelpful behaviors like excessive sleep and avoiding activity – to help lower pain levels and improve your mental and emotional health.

Eat healthy. A healthy diet provides nutrients to help you recover and feel better. Eat vegetables, fruits, lean meats, and whole grains while limiting processed foods, added fats, sugar, and alcoholic drinks.

Stay hydrated. Drinking water helps your body heal faster, flushing toxins from anesthesia, reducing potential surgical complications like a deep blood clot, and supporting overall health.

Get moving. Follow your doctor's instructions to move around gently and increase your physical activity. Exercise and movement after surgery can help you recover faster and reduce complications.

Lying in bed or sitting all day can delay healing and cause serious complications, like blood clots. Your doctor may refer you to a physical or occupational therapist to assist you.

Create calm. Practice relaxation exercises like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and mindfulness to calm the mind and body and enhance your well-being.

Slow, deep breathing from the diaphragm is easy to do anytime, anywhere. Benefits include increasing the supply of oxygen to the brain, reducing heart rate, stabilizing blood pressure, increasing feelings of calmness and relaxation, and changing the focus from the pain to the breath – telling your nervous system that everything is okay and you're safe.

Deep Breathing is Easy

1. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose.
2. Slowly and gently allow your stomach to rise like a balloon as you use your diaphragm to inhale.
3. Hold your breath.
4. Slowly and gently release the breath through pursed lips as if you are blowing into a straw or through your nose if you find that more comfortable.

Do this for three to five minutes, two or three times a day, or as needed. Aim for six or less breaths per minute.

Quit smoking. Smoking affects your body's ability to heal – weakening the immune system and leading to a higher risk of infection. Stopping smoking can lower your risk of complications, help your body heal, and shorten your recovery time.

Get restorative sleep. You can improve your sleep quality by:

- Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule.
- Creating a positive sleeping environment that is cool, dark, comfortable, and quiet.
- Watching what you eat and drink – limiting alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine later in the day.
- Limiting naps to 20-30 minutes, or don't nap at all.
- Avoiding blue screens, like TV, phones, and computers, one hour or more before bedtime.
- Staying active during the day but limiting exercise close to bedtime.
- Remove clocks from the room. It's hard to sleep when you are watching the time.
- Doing something relaxing like reading a book (outside the bedroom), practicing deep breathing, or taking a bath before bedtime.

Stay in touch. Everyone recovers in their own way and experiences pain differently. Contact your doctor if you think your pain is not manageable, hasn't gone away beyond the expected recovery period, changed location and intensity, or you have any other concerns. You may need additional guidance or help from different healthcare professionals.