Royal Cornwall Hospitals
NHS Trust

Pain following your operation

Information for orthopaedic patients



Outstanding Care for One+All

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Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for patients who have had orthopaedic surgery or procedures. It provides information to help relieve pain following your operation.

Why do I have pain after surgery?

Pain after surgery is normal. During orthopaedic procedures (such as hip replacement, knee replacement, or ankle fracture repairs), tissues including bone, muscle, and ligaments are affected. This can cause discomfort as the body heals.

How much pain you feel can depend on:

- the type of surgery (for example major surgery or minor arthroscopy)
- your general health
- your personal pain tolerance
- whether you had chronic pain before the operation.

Most patients experience:

- gradual pain improvement within 24 to 72 hours
- noticeable improvement within 1 to 2 weeks
- mild discomfort or stiffness for several weeks (sometimes longer for major procedures).

Some discomfort is normal, but severe or uncontrolled pain is not. Tell staff if you are struggling. We will work with you to reduce your pain.

Why is pain control important?

Good pain control helps you to:

- move more comfortably
- start physiotherapy earlier
- breathe deeply and cough effectively
- sleep better
- recover more quickly.

How will my pain be controlled?

Pain relief is individualised for each patient. We usually combine different approaches to improve comfort and reduce side effects.

Local anaesthetic

These numb the surgical area and may include:

- local anaesthetic injections into the tissues around the wound
- nerve blocks: local anaesthetic injections into the tissues surrounding the nerve or group of nerves. These can last hours or sometimes longer.
- spinal or epidural anaesthetic.

These techniques are often used instead of or alongside general anaesthesia, depending on what is most suitable for you. They can give excellent pain relief for several hours after surgery.

Regular pain relief medication

You may be given:

- paracetamol (acetaminophen)
- anti-inflammatory medicines (such as ibuprofen, naproxen)
- opioid medications (such as morphine or oxycodone) if stronger pain relief is needed.
- a patient-controlled analgesia (PCA) pump. This is connected to you through your cannula. It allows you to press a button to receive a safe dose of pain medication.

Your medication plan will be adjusted based on your level of pain and recovery.

Other ways to reduce pain and swelling

These simple measures can help significantly:

- applying ice packs to reduce swelling
- elevating the affected limb, where appropriate
- using splints or braces to protect the surgical area
- early guided movement and physiotherapy
- relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or watching television and listening to music.

These methods can reduce swelling, discomfort, and inflammation.

Are there any side effects?

Some pain medicines may cause:

- nausea or vomiting
- drowsiness
- itching.

Constipation

Some pain medicines (especially opioids like morphine) can cause constipation.

To help prevent this:

- drink fluids
- stay as mobile as possible
- take laxatives if prescribed
- tell staff if you have not opened your bowels for 2 or 3 days.

Pain and movement

It is important to start moving as advised by your surgeon or physiotherapist.

You may begin with:

- gentle assisted walking
- physiotherapy sessions
- position changes in bed
- gradual increases in activity
- deep breathing exercises.

Taking pain relief before doing activities or exercises can make movement easier.



What should I look out for?

Speak to your nurse or doctor if you experience:

- pain that suddenly becomes much worse
- pain not relieved by medication or other pain management approaches
- increasing swelling, redness, or warmth around the surgical area
- fever
- new numbness or tingling (especially after a nerve block should have worn off).



How can I help my recovery?

To support your recovery:

- discuss any concerns about pain with your care team
- tell us if pain relief is not working
- do physiotherapy exercises regularly
- stop smoking if possible (this can delay healing)
- take medication as prescribed
- rest when needed
- try other pain management approaches.

Your care team is here to help you manage pain effectively.

Feeling low after surgery

It is common to feel low or emotional after surgery due to pain, reduced mobility, or being in hospital. These feelings usually improve with recovery.

What can help:

- talking to staff, family, or friends
- keeping active and maintaining a routine

Tell staff if low mood persists.

Frequently asked questions

Will I become addicted to pain medication?

Short-term use of pain medication after surgery is generally safe under medical supervision.

How long will I need pain relief?

Most patients reduce strong painkillers within a few days to weeks.

Some mild pain relief may be needed for longer depending on the procedure.

Is some swelling and stiffness normal?

Yes. This is common after surgery and should improve over time with movement and physiotherapy.

Final message

Some pain after orthopaedic surgery is normal. Our goal is to keep you as comfortable as possible so you can move, recover, and return to normal activities safely.

If you are worried about your pain at any time, please speak to your healthcare team. We are here to support you throughout your recovery.

Further information

NHS UK

- Website: www.nhs.uk/live-well/pain/10-ways-to-ease-pain



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