

Managing Post-Op Pain at Home



Pain is expected after surgery. Know that you have a right to have this pain controlled. Managing pain helps you recover faster. Less pain means you can be active sooner. It also means less stress on the body and mind, which will help your body heal. When you go home after surgery, including same-day surgery, you will take charge of your pain management.

What is post-op pain?

Pain after surgery (post-op pain) is normal. How much pain you feel depends on the surgery. Your use of pain medicines and your sensitivity to pain are also factors. Each person feels pain differently. So try not to compare your pain with someone else's. Your healthcare team will need to know how you are feeling. Be honest. If you are in pain, say so.

Measuring your pain

A pain scale helps you rate pain intensity (how strong you feel the pain is). On the scale, 0 means no pain, and 10 is the worst pain possible. Pain scales are not used to compare your pain with another person's pain. A pain scale is used only to measure your pain and how it changes for you. You should rate your pain every few hours. You may feel some pain even with medicines. It's important to tell your healthcare provider if medicines don't reduce the pain. Be sure to mention if the pain suddenly increases or changes.



Your recovery

If you have had same-day surgery, you may feel groggy or tired from the medicines given during surgery for your first hours at home. As pain management methods used during surgery wear off, pain may increase. So be sure not to skip a dose of prescribed medicine. In fact, set an alarm or have someone remind you when it's time to take your medicine. During this time, try to rest, even if you feel pretty good. Within the first 24 hours, a nurse or other healthcare provider is likely to call and ask how you're doing.

Medicines for pain

Medicines can help to block pain, limit swelling, and control related problems. You may be given more than 1 medicine to treat your pain. Medicines may be changed as you feel better, or if they cause side effects.

Pain medicine can be given in several ways:

- By injection
- By mouth
- As a patch, cream, or ointment
- As a suppository

Medicines

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

What they do

Reduce mild to moderate pain. They also help reduce swelling.

Possible side effects

Nausea, stomach and digestive problems, and kidney and liver problems. Some NSAIDs may increase the risk for cardiovascular disease in some people.

Opioids (morphine and similar medicines often called narcotics)	Reduce moderate to severe pain	Nausea, vomiting, itching, drowsiness, constipation, slowed or shallow breathing
Other pain relievers (analgesics)	Reduce mild to severe pain	Constipation, nausea, dizziness, drowsiness, kidney and liver problems
Seizure medicines (anticonvulsants)	Manage nerve-related pain	Drowsiness, dizziness, liver problems
Medicines for depression (antidepressants)	Manage chronic pain	Dry mouth, drowsiness, dizziness, constipation

Nonmedicine pain relief

Medicines are not the only way to manage pain after surgery.

You can use ice to help reduce swelling and pain. Use a cold pack or bag of ice cubes wrapped in a thin cloth. Never put ice directly on your skin. Use the ice for up to 20 minutes at a time every 3 to 4 hours.

You can also reduce swelling and pain by keeping the operated area above the level of your heart if you can. This helps blood and other fluids drain from the area.

You can also use relaxation to reduce pain. Try these methods:

- **Visualization or guided imagery.** You picture yourself in a quiet, peaceful place to help take your mind off the pain.
- **Progressive body relaxation.** Starting at your feet, you clench and release your muscles. Work up your body slowly until you reach your neck and face.
- **Deep breathing.** You breathe in deeply and hold your breath for a few seconds. Then exhale slowly to help relax your body.

Tips for controlling pain

- Give pain medicine time to work. Most pain relievers taken by mouth need at least 20 to 30 minutes to take effect. They may not reach their maximum effect for close to an hour.
- Take pain medicine at regular times as directed. Don't wait until the pain gets bad to take it.
- Get plenty of rest. Taking your medicine at night may help you get a good night's rest.
- If pain lessens, try taking your medicine less often or in smaller doses.

Safety tips for taking pain medicines

- If you are worried about becoming addicted or have a history of substance abuse, talk with your healthcare provider before surgery. An open discussion can protect you and make sure that effective pain management strategies are used.
- Let your provider know all of the medicines you're taking. Pain medicines can be dangerous when used with other medicines. For example, don't take opioids with benzodiazepines, such as alprazolam or lorazepam. Doing so can cause serious health problems. These include extreme sleepiness, slowed breathing, and death.
- Ask your pharmacist if you need to take the medicine with food or milk to avoid an upset stomach.
- Don't break, crush, or cut in half any long-acting medicines. This could be harmful.
- Don't take more medicine than directed. If your pain isn't relieved, call your healthcare provider.
- Try to time your medicine so that you take it before starting an activity, such as dressing or sitting at the table for dinner.

- Constipation is a common side effect with some pain medicines. Eating fruit, vegetables, and other foods high in fiber may help. Also drink plenty of fluids. Your healthcare provider may recommend a stool softener.
- Don't drink alcohol while you are taking pain medicine. This can make you dizzy and slow your breathing. It can even be fatal.
- Don't drive if you are taking opioid medicines.

When to call your healthcare provider

Call your healthcare provider if any of these occur:

- Your pain is not relieved or if it gets worse
- You can't take your pain medicines as prescribed
- You have severe side effects like dizziness, confusion, or severe constipation

Call 911

Call 911 right away if you have any of these:

- Breathing problems
- Trouble waking up

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