

Recovering from a knee replacement

It may take several months or longer to fully recover from a knee replacement. This can vary depending on your age and general health.

Recovery for a partial knee replacement should be shorter than a total knee replacement.

It's important to follow the advice the hospital gives you on looking after your knee to have a good recovery.

Recovering in hospital

After the operation, you'll spend some time in a recovery room where you may be given medicines to help with the pain.

You'll continue to have painkillers in the days after the operation as your knee will be sore.

You'll have help from nurses and physiotherapists to start walking soon after the operation so you can go home as soon as possible. You'll need crutches or a walking frame at first.

Recovering at home

You can usually go home if your wound is healing well and you can safely get around. Most people can leave hospital 1 to 3 days after the operation.

Before you leave, a physiotherapist or occupational therapist will talk to you about managing daily activities and home exercise programmes. Following the exercises early on in your recovery will help with the long-term strength and movement in your knee.

A nurse will take out your stitches or clips after about 10 days. You'll also have a follow-up appointment about 6 weeks after the operation to check you're recovering well.

Do

use crutches or walking sticks at first – go down to 1 crutch then a walking stick when you feel confident

try walking without an aid after about 6 weeks if you feel ready

get up and walk around for 5 minutes every hour to prevent [blood clots](#)

wait at least 6 weeks to drive again if you've had a total knee replacement or 3 weeks if you've had a partial knee replacement – check with your doctor that you're fit to drive

avoid twisting your knee, bending down and reaching up as much as possible

follow the exercises your physiotherapist has recommended

keep your leg raised as much as possible to reduce swelling

return to work when you feel ready – this is usually after about 6 to 12 weeks but will depend on the type of work you do

Don't

do not sit with your legs crossed for the first 6 weeks

do not sleep with a pillow under your knee (you do not need to sleep in a special position after the operation)

do not kneel on your new knee until your doctor says you can

do not stand for long periods of time as this could cause swelling in your ankles

do not do household tasks that involve lifting or moving anything heavy (like vacuuming) for the first 3 months

Complications of a knee replacement

Possible complications of a knee replacement

A knee replacement is a common and safe procedure. However, as with any operation there are risks. Your doctor will explain these to you.

Most people who have a knee replacement have no complications. If there are any, they are usually minor and can be treated.

The risk of having complications depends on your age and general health.

Blood clots or DVT (deep vein thrombosis)

[Blood clots](#) or [DVT \(deep vein thrombosis\)](#) are possible after a knee replacement because of how the blood flows and clots after surgery. This is often not serious.

If you have a blood clot that causes pain or swelling, your doctor can give you [anticoagulant medicines](#) to help.

A blood clot that forms in the leg can sometimes travel to your lungs ([pulmonary embolism](#)). This can cause serious complications.

To reduce the risk of blood clots your doctor might suggest wearing compression stockings or taking anticoagulant medicines.

Wound infection

There's a small chance that your knee wound could get infected after the operation. This is usually treated with antibiotics.

If the infection spreads deep into the knee joint, you may need further surgery.

Damage to nerves or tissue

During surgery, there's a chance that a blood vessel, nerve or ligament around the knee joint could be damaged.

This is not common and can either be repaired during surgery or will heal afterwards.

Problems with your new knee

Most people find their daily life improves after a knee replacement. However, it's possible that you may have ongoing issues with your new knee, including:

- problems bending the knee
- ongoing pain and stiffness
- the knee being unstable when you stand up or walk

Physiotherapy and certain exercises may help with these problems.

Most knee replacements last for about 20 years or more. Depending on when you had the operation you may need another replacement later in life, but this is not common.

In the hospital

After the surgery you will be taken to the recovery room for observation. Once your blood pressure, pulse, and breathing are stable and you are alert, you will be taken to your hospital room. Knee replacement surgery usually requires an in-hospital stay of several days.

It is important to begin moving the new joint after surgery. A physical therapist will meet with you soon after your surgery and plan an exercise program for you. A continuous passive motion (CPM) machine may be used to begin the physical therapy. This machine moves your new knee joint through its range of motion while you are resting in bed. Your pain will be controlled with medication so that you can participate in the exercise. You will be given an exercise plan to follow both in the hospital and after discharge.

You will be discharged home or to a rehabilitation center. In either case, your doctor will arrange for continuation of physical therapy until you regain muscle strength and good range of motion.

At home

Once you are home, it is important to keep the surgical area clean and dry. Your doctor will give you specific bathing instructions. The stitches or surgical staples will be removed during a follow-up office visit.

To help reduce swelling, you may be asked to elevate your leg or apply ice to the knee.

Take a pain reliever for soreness as recommended by your doctor. Aspirin or certain other pain medications may increase the chance of bleeding. Be sure to take only recommended medications.

Notify your doctor to report any of the following:

Fever

Redness, swelling, bleeding, or other drainage from the incision site

Increased pain around the incision site

You may resume your normal diet unless your doctor advises you differently.

You should not drive until your doctor tells you to. Other activity restrictions may apply. Full recovery from the surgery may take several months.

It is important that you avoid falls after your knee replacement surgery, because a fall can result in damage to the new joint. Your therapist may recommend an assistive device (cane or walker) to help you walk until your strength and balance improve.

Making certain modifications to your home may help you during your recovery. These modifications include, but are not limited to, the following:

Proper handrails along all stairs

Safety handrails in the shower or bath

Shower bench or chair

Raised toilet seat

Long-handled sponge and shower hose

Dressing stick

Sock aid

Long-handled shoe horn

Reaching stick to grab objects

Removing loose carpets and electrical cords that may cause you to trip

Avoiding stair-climbing until recommended by your doctor

Your doctor may give you additional or alternate instructions after the procedure, depending on your particular situation.