

Pain Management After Foot and Ankle Surgery

AAOS PAIN MANAGEMENT RESOURCE CENTER



The First 48 Hours

The first 48 hours after foot and ankle surgery are when pain usually is the worst. Your foot and ankle likely will be in a splint, cast, or bandage to protect it.

During this time, rest often, keep your foot raised above your heart, and use ice to help reduce pain and swelling.

Pain and swelling peak in first 48 hours

- ✓ Rest
- ✓ Elevation
- ✓ Ice



Rest, keep your foot **elevated** above your heart, and use **ice regularly** to help reduce swelling and discomfort.

Rest

Rest often during the early recovery period.

Elevation

Keep your foot raised above your heart when sitting or lying down.

Ice

Use ice to reduce pain and swelling.

Take Medications Exactly as Directed

Your surgeon may prescribe pain medications to keep you comfortable; this may include opioid and nonopioid medications.

Manage Common Side Effects

Pain medications may affect how you feel and eat. Use these tips to help manage common side effects of pain medications.

Constipation

What helps?

- Eat high-fiber foods: fruits, vegetables, oatmeal, and beans
- Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water each day
- Try prune juice or fiber supplements if needed

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- ✓ **3. Try prune juice or fiber supplements if needed**

Recovery Timeline

Pain should slowly improve after the first 48 hours, but recovery still requires rest, careful activity progression, and close follow-up with your surgeon.

After the First 48 Hours

Pain should slowly improve; however, you still need to rest and avoid putting weight on your foot. Keep your foot raised when sitting or lying down.



1 to 2 Weeks

If you have a cast or splint, your surgeon will schedule a follow-up visit to remove it and check your incision.

3 to 4 Weeks

You may switch to a walking boot or specialized shoe, depending on your surgery. Your surgeon may have you start gentle foot and ankle exercises to improve strength and flexibility.



About 1 Month

Most patients can stop using the walking boot or special shoe. Mild residual pain and swelling are normal. Over-the-counter pain medications, such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen, often are enough to manage discomfort.

About 2 Months

Most patients can return to normal daily activities; however, return to intense exercise or sports may take longer. Physical therapy may help you regain strength and movement.

2 to 6 Months and Beyond

Full recovery may take 2 to 6 months, depending on the type of surgery. Some swelling may last 6 to 12 months. Wearing compression socks and staying active may help reduce swelling over time.

Pain Medication Options

Most patients use more than one type of medication to manage pain and lower side effects. You may be prescribed a combination of the following:

Medication Option	Purpose and Notes
Prescription NSAIDs (eg, celecoxib, meloxicam, or diclofenac)	Help reduce pain and swelling; some patients may have stomach upset.
Opioids (eg, oxycodone, hydrocodone, or tramadol)	Used for severe pain for a short time; may cause nausea, constipation, or drowsiness. Use the lowest dose for the shortest time.
Nonopioid medications (eg, Journavx [suzetrigine])	May be used instead of opioids for moderate to severe pain.
Nerve pain medications (eg, gabapentin, pregabalin)	Help manage nerve-related pain or sharp, shooting sensations.
Muscle relaxants (eg, cyclobenzaprine, carisoprodol, tizanidine, methocarbamol, baclofen)	Help manage muscle spasms.
Certain antidepressants (eg, amitriptyline, nortriptyline, duloxetine, venlafaxine)	May help with long-term or nerve pain.
Anti-nausea medications (eg, ondansetron or promethazine)	Help prevent nausea from opioids.
Over-the-counter medications (eg, acetaminophen or ibuprofen)	May help later in recovery. Do not use these with prescription NSAIDs unless your surgeon says it is safe.
Topical medications (eg, diclofenac gel, lidocaine ointment, trolamine salicylate, or topical menthol)	Creams or gels applied to the skin to help reduce pain.
Stool softeners (eg, docusate sodium or polyethylene glycol)	Help prevent constipation caused by opioids.
Lidocaine patches	May help relieve pain near the incision.

Why Multiple Medications?

Using more than one type of medication may improve pain control and reduce side effects.

Alternative Pain Management Strategies

Strategy	How to Use It
Ice	Use ice several times each day to reduce pain and swelling. Wrap an ice pack in a thin towel. Do not use it for more than 20 minutes at a time.
Elevation	Keep your foot raised above your heart as much as possible. Use pillows when lying down or a stool when sitting.
Compression	Wear a compression sock or wrap to help reduce swelling. Do not wrap too tightly because this may affect blood flow.
Distraction	Do simple activities you enjoy, such as reading or watching television. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, also may help.
Movement	Gently move your toes and follow your exercise plan. This helps blood flow and prevents stiffness. Do not overdo it but keep moving a little each day.



Keep Moving a Little Each Day

Movement should be gentle and should follow your surgeon's instructions. Activity should increase slowly, and high-impact activities should be avoided until your surgeon says they are safe.

Postoperative Nutrition and Hydration (0 to 6 Weeks)

Good nutrition and hydration help your body heal faster. They may reduce muscle loss, lower pain, and decrease the risk of problems. Key steps include eating enough protein, getting important vitamins, and drinking enough water.

Talk with your surgeon or a nutrition expert for a plan that fits your needs, especially before taking supplements.

Key Steps

- High-protein diet: Eat enough protein (eg, 1.2 to 2.0 g/kg of body weight) to help prevent muscle loss while you are less active.
- Foods to avoid: Limit processed foods, added sugars, and alcohol because they may increase inflammation and disrupt sleep.
- Hydration: Drink 8 to 10 cups of water each day to support healing.



Nutrient	Examples/Purpose
Protein	Lean meats, fish, eggs, Greek yogurt, tofu, beans, protein shakes
Vitamin C	Citrus fruits, strawberries, bell peppers, broccoli; helps tissue healing
Vitamin D and calcium	Support bone health
Zinc	Red meat, nuts, seeds, shellfish; helps with wound healing
Omega-3 fatty acids	Salmon, mackerel, flaxseed, chia seeds; help reduce inflammation

Sample Daily Food Intake

- Morning: Greek yogurt with berries (high protein and vitamin C)
- Lunch/dinner: Salmon or chicken with leafy greens and beans (protein, omega-3 fatty acids, and fiber)
- Snacks: Nuts, seeds, or protein shakes

When to Contact Your Orthopaedic Surgeon

Call your surgeon right away if you have any of the following symptoms. It is better to be cautious during recovery.

- Severe or worsening pain that does not improve with medications
- New or worsening numbness or tingling in your foot or ankle
- Red, warm, or draining skin around the incision
- Fever over 101°F (38.3°C) that does not get better with medication
- Pain or swelling in your calf
- No bowel movement for 2 to 3 days
- Hard or painful stools



Always Follow Your Surgeon's Instructions

This information does not replace medical advice. Your surgeon's instructions should guide your recovery plan and medication use.

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