


Path to Recovery: Understanding Pain After Orthopaedic Surgery


Recovery is not always steady. Pain, stiffness, and swelling change over time. Use this guide to understand what is normal and when to call your care team.

THREE PHASES OF HEALING


Days 1 Through 3
Highest Pain, Swelling
Pain usually is highest during the first 1 to 3 days after surgery.




Weeks 1 and 2
Settles Into Stiffness
Pain often becomes stiffness and soreness during this time.



Weeks 3+
Recovery is Not a Straight Line
Some days feel better than other days. You may feel more sore after activity or physical therapy.



Why Pain Fluctuates Daily
Short-term increases in pain are common. They may be caused by more activity, swelling, or poor sleep.



KNOWING YOUR SYMPTOMS

Normal Recovery: What to Expect

Big Four Normal Sensations

- Pain** (healing tissues)
- Soreness** (tired muscles)
- Stiffness** (less movement)
- Swelling** (fluid buildup)


- ✓ Pain pattern: Pain slowly improves, with short increases after activity.
- ✓ Physical signs: Swelling that changes during the day; stiffness after rest.

Concerning Signs: Call Your Care Team

When to Call Your Care Team
Focus on how your symptoms change over time rather than just how strong they feel.

- ⚠ **Pain pattern:** Pain that gets worse or does not improve
- ⚠ **Physical signs:** Redness, drainage, fever, or new numbness or weakness
- ⚠ **Emergency signs:** Calf pain, chest pain, or sudden trouble breathing; mild discomfort during prescribed exercises is normal.

Always Contact Your Care Team for Concerns



Understanding Pain After Orthopaedic Surgery

Healing is not always steady. Pain, swelling, and stiffness may change from day to day. Some days will feel better than other days. This does not always mean something is wrong.

Normal Symptoms During Recovery

After surgery, most patients have four common symptoms:

● Pain

● Soreness

● Stiffness

● Swelling

These are normal parts of healing. Pain usually is the worst during the first few days after surgery. During weeks 1 and 2, pain often becomes more like stiffness and soreness. After that, symptoms may come and go, especially after activity or physical therapy.

Fluctuating Symptoms

Short-term increases in pain are normal. Pain may increase after:

- Physical therapy
- Walking or more activity
- Poor sleep
- Swelling later in the day

A short increase in pain does not always mean there is a problem. Look at your overall progress rather than just one bad day.

When to Call Your Care Team

Call your care team if your pain gets worse rather than improves or your pain does not follow a steady recovery pattern. Also call your care team if you notice warning signs:

- Redness
- Drainage
- Fever
- New numbness
- New weakness

Get help right away if you have:

- Calf pain
- Chest pain
- Sudden trouble breathing

Key Takeaway

Recovery takes time. Small changes in pain are normal; however, warning signs should not be ignored. If you are unsure, contact your care team.

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