

Pain Management After Shoulder or Elbow Surgery

AAOS PAIN MANAGEMENT RESOURCE CENTER



Planning before surgery can make recovery easier at home. Set up a safe, comfortable place to rest; keep items you use often within reach; and arrange help with meals, dressing, transportation, and daily tasks.

Preoperative Preparation

Medical Preparation

- Tell your doctor about all medications and supplements.
- Share allergies and lung, heart, or nerve conditions.
- Some medications may need to be stopped before surgery.

Pain Management Plan

- Your care team may use more than one method to control pain.
- A nerve block may help control pain for 1 to 3 days after surgery.
- Plan for medications, ice, a sling or brace, and a safe sleeping position.

Home Preparation

- Set up a recovery area before surgery.
- Keep everyday items within easy reach.
- Arrange help for dressing, meals, and transportation.

Hygiene

- Shower as instructed before surgery.
- Do not shave the surgical area.
- Follow your care team's instructions for skin preparation.

Preoperative Nutrition and Hydration

- **Protein:** Eat more protein to help build muscle before surgery.
- **Vitamins:** You may be asked to take vitamin C and vitamin D to support healing.
- **Hydration:** Drink 8 to 10 glasses of water each day unless told otherwise.
- **Plan ahead:** Prepare easy meals and have fluids ready for when you return home.



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
Acetaminophen and/or anti-inflammatory medications (eg, ibuprofen or naproxen)	Help reduce mild to moderate pain and swelling. Anti-inflammatory medications often are taken on a regular schedule if approved. Do not use these with prescription NSAIDs unless your surgeon says it is safe.
Opioids (eg, hydrocodone, oxycodone, 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	Help manage muscle spasms.
Certain antidepressants	May help with long-term or nerve pain.
Anti-nausea medications	Help prevent nausea from opioids.
Stool softeners	Help prevent constipation caused by opioids.
Lidocaine patches	May help relieve pain near the incision.

Medication Safety Principle

- Use each medication only as instructed.
- Never take more than prescribed.
- Ask your surgeon before combining over-the-counter and prescription medications.

Medication Safety and Side Effects

Nonopioid Pain Medications

- Take first when instructed.
- Acetaminophen helps with mild to moderate pain.
- NSAIDs help reduce pain and inflammation if approved.

Opioid Pain Medications

- Take only if needed for moderate to severe pain.
- Use the lowest dose for the shortest time.
- Side effects may include constipation, sleepiness, nausea, and risk of dependence.

Important Safety Reminders

- Do not drink alcohol while taking pain medications.
- Do not drive while taking opioids.
- Never take more than prescribed.
- Keep medications away from children and pets.
- Talk to your surgeon about all medications and supplements.

Take medication exactly as directed

- ✓ **Your doctor may prescribe pain medication,** which can include a combination of medications.



Common Side Effects and What to Do

Constipation

- Drink 6 to 8 cups of water each day.
- Eat high-fiber foods.
- Take stool softeners, if prescribed.

Nausea

- Take medications with food, if allowed.
- Eat small, simple meals.

Drowsiness

- Rest as needed.
- Avoid driving.

Alternative Pain Management Strategies

Strategy	How to Use It
Ice	Use several times each day for about 20 minutes. Keep a cloth between the ice pack and your skin.
Sling or brace	Wear your sling or brace as directed. Remove it only for hygiene, physical therapy, or when allowed.
Movement	Move your hand and wrist to keep blood flowing. Do not move the surgical shoulder or elbow unless told to.
Rest and sleep	Sleep in a reclined position, support your arm, and avoid pressure on the surgical area.

Sleep After Shoulder and Elbow Surgery

Supported Sleeping Positions

- **Recliner chair:** Sleep at a slight angle, about 30° to 45°.
- **Back sleeping:** Use pillows or a wedge to keep your upper body raised.
- **Side sleeping:** Sleep on your nonsurgical side and support your arm with pillows in front of you.
- Place a pillow under your elbow and forearm to reduce strain and pain.

✓ SUPPORTED SLEEPING POSITIONS

<p>RECLINER CHAIR</p>  <p style="font-size: small;">Sleep at a slight angle, about 30° to 45°.</p>	<p>BACK SLEEPING</p>  <p style="font-size: small;">Use pillows or a wedge to keep your upper body raised.</p>	<p>SIDE SLEEPING</p>  <p style="font-size: small;">Sleep on your nonsurgical side and support your arm with pillows in front of you.</p>	<p>SUPPORT YOUR ARM</p>  <p style="font-size: small;">Place a pillow under your elbow and forearm to reduce strain and pain.</p>
<p>✗ POSITIONS TO AVOID</p>			
<p>DO NOT SLEEP ON YOUR STOMACH</p>  <p style="font-size: x-small;">This position can put stress on your neck, shoulder, and surgical area.</p>	<p>AVOID LYING FLAT ON YOUR BACK</p>  <p style="font-size: x-small;">Lying flat can increase swelling and discomfort.</p>	<p>DO NOT SLEEP ON THE SURGICAL SIDE (OR ON THE ARM WITH THE SLING)</p>  <p style="font-size: x-small;">Sleeping on the surgical side can put pressure on your shoulder and the sling. Wait until your surgeon says it is safe.</p>	
<p> Good sleep supports healing. Use pillows for support and follow your surgeon's guidance.</p>			

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

Nutrient	Examples/Purpose
Protein	Lean meats, fish, eggs, Greek yogurt, tofu, beans, and 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.
- Lunch/dinner: Salmon or chicken with leafy greens and beans.
- Snacks: Nuts, seeds, or protein shakes.

Key Steps

- Eat enough protein, especially while you are less active.
- Limit processed foods, added sugars, and alcohol.
- Drink 8 to 10 cups of water each day unless told otherwise.



Wound Care

Keep your incision clean, dry, and protected for about 10 to 14 days after surgery. This helps prevent infection. Most incisions are closed with dissolvable stitches. The skin often is covered with thin adhesive strips or a waterproof dressing.

Initial Wound Care (1 to 3 Days)

- Leave the first dressing on for 2 to 3 days.
- Keep the dressing clean and dry, especially during the first 48 hours.
- A small amount of blood or fluid on the bandage can be normal.
- Use ice regularly during the first 48 hours.

Showering and Hygiene

- You may be able to shower within 24 to 48 hours if you have a waterproof covering.
- Do not soak the incision in a bath, hot tub, or pool for 3 to 6 weeks.
- Do not scrub the incision; let soapy water run over it and pat dry.
- Do not put lotions or creams on the incision unless instructed.

Adhesive Strips and Sutures

- Leave adhesive strips in place until they fall off or are removed at the first follow-up visit.
- Most stitches dissolve on their own; staples, if used, are removed at follow-up.
- Follow your surgeon's instructions for dressing changes.

Incision Care After Surgery

First 10–14 days

1 Keep It Clean & Dry

- Leave dressing on 2–3 days
- A little spotting can be normal
- Ice for 48 hours

2 Shower Safely

- Shower if covered
- Pat dry
- No soaking

3 Strips & Stitches

- Leave strips in place
- Most stitches dissolve
- Follow dressing instructions

Protect your incision. Keep it clean, dry, and covered. *You're healing!*

Activity and Recovery After Shoulder or Elbow Surgery

Activity should progress gradually. Follow the sling, brace, exercise, and movement limits provided by your surgeon and physical therapist.

24 to 72 Hours <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pain may increase as the nerve block wears off.• Use ice and take medications regularly.• Start gentle movement if instructed.	1 to 2 Weeks <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Swelling improves.• Continue sling use.• Start or continue physical therapy.
3 to 6 Weeks <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase movement.• Pain continues to improve.• Start light daily activities.	6 to 12 Weeks <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Start strengthening exercises.• Return to more normal activities as instructed.
3 to 6 Months <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strength and function improve.• Keep following your therapy plan.	6 to 12 Months <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most patients fully recover.• Return to sports if approved.


Physical Therapy and Safe Movement

- Wear your sling or brace as directed.
- Start physical therapy as prescribed.
- Gentle movement helps prevent stiffness.

When to Call Your Orthopaedic Surgeon









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


Possible Infection	Circulation or Nerve Problems	Other Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fever over 101°F (38.3°C). Severe pain or swelling. Redness, warmth, or drainage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severe swelling in the arm or hand. Numbness that does not improve. Fingers that turn pale, blue, or cold. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Severe pain. Shortness of breath. Chest pain.



Call Your Surgeon Right Away

Be cautious during recovery.

1. Possible Infection	2. Circulation or Nerve Problems	3. Other Concerns
 <p>Fever over 101°F (38.3°C)</p>	 <p>Severe swelling in the arm or hand</p>	 <p>Severe pain</p>
 <p>Severe pain or swelling</p>	 <p>Numbness that does not improve</p>	 <p>Shortness of breath</p>
 <p>Redness, warmth, or drainage</p>	 <p>Fingers that turn pale, blue, or cold</p>	 <p>Chest pain</p>



If you notice these symptoms, contact your surgeon right away.

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