



What to expect after *knee replacement*

Insights from Previous Patient Experiences

The first and most important thing to remember is: no two people heal at the same rate. Your recovery will be uniquely yours, and you can't compare it to anyone else's. Your progress will be measured by you, your surgeon and your physical therapist. However, many patients have common post-surgery experiences, and we think you might find their comments helpful.

Appetite and Weight

It's normal to have some loss of appetite after surgery. You may not feel like eating as much, or as often, as you did before your knee replacement. This change in appetite may cause some unexpected weight loss, but this is normal. On a positive note, less weight means less stress on your joints.

Fatigue

In addition to any sleep issues, you may feel fatigued earlier in the day than you used to. This is normal—you're working harder at everyday movement.

Medication

There is nothing wrong with taking your prescribed pain medication as needed. You will eventually—the sooner the better—stop needing the strongest pain meds and switch to over-the-counter medications like acetaminophen, ibuprofen or naproxen. Prescription pain relievers may cause constipation, so your doctor will tell you what you can take to help prevent it.

Pain

You will probably feel pain in your thigh at first, not in your knee, as a result of your surgical team using a tourniquet on your leg during your operation to control bleeding. Your thigh has been squeezed tightly and bruised, although the bruising won't be visible for several days. The bruising is normal, whether it is slight or extensive. The thigh pain may last for weeks, and as it diminishes, you'll probably feel more pain in your new knee.

Other Pain: As you start walking again, your back might hurt. Your good leg might hurt. This is because your body has gotten used to walking with a compensating gait that lessened your knee pain. Now your new knee, leg and foot are straight, and your gait is aligned. It will take time for your body to adjust to these changes and become accustomed to a new way of moving. This may take months, not days or weeks.

Physical Therapy (PT)

Physical therapy is absolutely essential to your recovery. You'll start the same day as your surgery, and it will continue for several weeks, starting with either two weeks of visits at home or sessions at an outpatient PT facility. These sessions usually occur three times a week, and progress will be steady as long as you commit to the process.

Sleep

Sleeping through the night may be a problem for a couple of months. You may feel the need to get up, to use an ice pack for pain or walk to relieve stiffness. This may occur several times a night, particularly early on. Additionally, you may feel restless, as if there is no comfortable position for your leg. This will improve over time.

Swelling

Immediately after surgery, your knee will be swollen, and it will be several months before that swelling gradually disappears. Additionally, your knee will feel warm to the touch. This is normal, and like the swelling, it will take several months to subside.

Walking Assistance

You will need to use a walker and then a cane to help you walk after your knee replacement. How soon you transition from the walker to the cane will depend on your balance, stability and strength as assessed by your physical therapist. While many patients hope to abandon the cane quickly, it is a helpful tool for both your balance and your comfort.

The Three Keys

The three most important things to focus on after knee replacement are range of motion, strength and endurance.

1. Range of motion is critical. You can probably bend your good leg to an angle of 140 degrees or so. Your new knee won't bend to even 90 degrees right away, and it won't straighten out completely, either. Getting to the point where you can bend it to 120 degrees will take time, probably months. Your progress will need to be slow and steady.

2. Strength will come from working with your physical therapists. They'll create a personalized program for you where you'll use weights and exercise equipment to strengthen your muscles through repetitive motion.

3. Endurance is addressed through walking—and lots of it. The more, the better. Using your cane, even after you feel that you don't need it anymore, will make longer walks easier. If you use it on the side opposite your new knee, it will take some weight off.

