



Official reprint from UpToDate®

www.uptodate.com © 2023 UpToDate, Inc. and/or its affiliates. All Rights Reserved.

Wolters Kluwer

Patient education: Managing pain after surgery (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

Please read the [Disclaimer](#) at the end of this page.

How will I feel after my surgery?

If you're having surgery, you probably wonder how you're going to feel afterwards. Many people worry that they will have pain. The amount of pain you will have, and how long it will last, depends partly on what kind of operation you are having. For example, you might not have much pain at all after having a small growth removed from your skin. But you might have quite a bit of pain after a more major surgery, such as hip or knee replacement. How you feel after surgery also depends on your age, health, and other medical problems.

There are things your doctors and nurses can do to help control your pain. They will work together to make sure you are as comfortable as possible after your surgery.

How is pain prevented?

Doctors use different medicines to make sure you do not feel any pain during your surgery. This is called "anesthesia." There are different kinds of anesthesia. For some types of surgery, you will get medicine to numb a small part of your body, or to block pain in a larger area. For other types of surgery, you are "put to sleep" so you don't feel, see, or hear anything until after it's over.

Along with anesthesia, your doctor can give you pain medicines before, during, and after your surgery. The exact medicines you will get, and how much of each, depends on your situation. Your doctors will decide how to treat you based on what type of surgery you are having, what kind of anesthesia you need, and your age and overall health.

During surgery, doctors can do different things to help control the pain you might have later. The goal is for you to be comfortable after the operation, although it's not always possible to avoid all pain. These are some of the things doctors can do:

- An injection (shot) of numbing medicine near where the surgeon is cutting – This can help reduce pain around your incision (the cut in your skin).
- A "nerve block" – For a nerve block, a doctor gives medicine as an injection (shot) near certain nerves. This stops the pain signals the nerves normally send, so you don't feel as much pain in that area. The nerve block can last for several hours after surgery is over. Sometimes, the medicine is given through a small tube (called a "catheter") that stays in place during surgery and for a while afterwards.
- Pain medicines given through an "IV" – An IV is a thin tube that goes into a vein. There are different kinds of pain medicines that are given through an IV. They include [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol), certain nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs or "NSAIDs," opioids, and others.
- Pain medicine given with spinal anesthesia – For some operations, you might need spinal anesthesia. For this kind of anesthesia, a doctor puts a small needle in your lower back. They inject medicine to numb the nerves in your spine, then remove the needle. The doctor can also give pain medicine this way.
- Medicines given through an "epidural" – This is a small tube (catheter) that goes into your back, near the nerves in your spine. The tube stays in during the surgery. It can also be left in after surgery, to help with pain while you are in the hospital. Doctors can use it to give both numbing medicines and pain medicines.

Different medicines and procedures have different side effects. Your doctors will work with you to figure out the best plan for your situation. Often, more than 1 pain medicine is used.

How is pain treated after surgery?

After surgery, when your anesthesia wears off, you might need more pain medicines. Some are taken as pills. Some are given in other ways, such as by injection (shot) or in a patch that goes on the skin. If you still have an IV or catheter, your doctor or nurse might continue to give pain medicines that way.

If you are staying in the hospital, your doctor or nurse might give you a button to press when you need pain relief. The button is attached to your IV or catheter, and will give you a

dose of medicine. The button has special settings to prevent you from getting too much medicine.

How long will I have pain?

It depends. After a minor operation, you might feel fine a few hours afterwards. After major surgery, you might need pain medicine for days or even weeks. Your doctor or nurse will work with you to make sure your pain is treated properly.

What will happen after I go home from the hospital?

Your doctor will tell you what kind of pain to expect after your surgery. They might give you a prescription for pain medicines to take after you go home.

It's important to take your pain medicines exactly the way the doctor or nurse tells you to. Taking too much of any medicine can be dangerous. In particular, opioids can cause serious problems if you take too much or mix them with other medicines. They can also lead to addiction in some people. Only take the amount your doctor or nurse tells you to, and stop taking the medicine as soon as your pain gets better. Then throw away any leftover medicines. But don't just throw them in the regular trash. Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can tell you how to get rid of them.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Anesthesia \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Questions to ask if you are having surgery or a procedure \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Opioid medicines for short-term treatment of pain \(The Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Jan 22, 2023.

This generalized information is a limited summary of diagnosis, treatment, and/or medication information. It is not meant to be comprehensive and should be used as a tool to help the user understand and/or assess potential diagnostic and treatment options. It does NOT include all information about conditions, treatments, medications, side effects, or risks that may apply to a specific patient. It is not intended to be medical advice or a substitute for the medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment of a health care provider based on the health care

provider's examination and assessment of a patient's specific and unique circumstances. Patients must speak with a health care provider for complete information about their health, medical questions, and treatment options, including any risks or benefits regarding use of medications. This information does not endorse any treatments or medications as safe, effective, or approved for treating a specific patient. UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates disclaim any warranty or liability relating to this information or the use thereof. The use of this information is governed by the Terms of Use, available at <https://www.wolterskluwer.com/en/know/clinical-effectiveness-terms> ©2023 UpToDate, Inc. and its affiliates and/or licensors. All rights reserved.

Topic 107939 Version 5.0

