

Activities After Knee Replacement

After having a knee replacement, you may expect your lifestyle to be a lot like it was before surgery— but without the pain. In many ways, you are right, but returning to your everyday activities takes time. Being an active participant in the healing process can help you get there sooner and ensure a more successful outcome.

Even though you will be able to resume most activities, you may want to avoid doing things that place excessive stress on your "new" knee, such as participating in high-impact sports like jogging. The suggestions here will help you enjoy your new knee while you safely resume your daily activities.

Hospital Discharge

Your hospital stay will typically last from 1 to 4 days, depending on the speed of your recovery. If your knee replacement is performed on an outpatient basis, you will go home on the same day as surgery.

Before you are discharged from the hospital, you will need to accomplish several goals, such as:

- Getting in and out of bed by yourself.
- Having acceptable pain control.
- Being able to eat, drink, and use the bathroom.
- Walking with an assistive device (a cane, walker, or crutches) on a level surface and being able to climb up and down two or three stairs.
- Being able to perform the prescribed home exercises.
- Understanding any knee precautions you may have been given to prevent injury and ensure proper healing.

If you are not able to accomplish these goals, it may be unsafe for you to go directly home after discharge. If this is the case, you may be temporarily transferred to a rehabilitation or skilled nursing center.

When you are discharged, your healthcare team will provide you with information to support your recovery at home. Although the complication rate after total knee replacement is low, when complications occur they can prolong or limit full recovery. Hospital staff will discuss possible complications, and review with you the warning signs of an infection or a blood clot.

Warning Signs of Infection

- Persistent fever (higher than 100 degrees)
- Shaking chills
- Increasing redness, tenderness or swelling of your wound
- Drainage of your wound
- Increasing pain with both activity and rest

Warning Signs of a Blood Clot

- Pain in your leg or calf unrelated to your incision
- Tenderness or redness above or below your knee
- Increasing swelling of your calf, ankle or foot

In very rare cases, a blood clot may travel to your lungs and become life-threatening. Signs that a blood clot has traveled to your lungs include:

- Shortness of breath
- Sudden onset of chest pain
- Localized chest pain with coughing

Notify your doctor if you develop any of the above signs.

Recovery at Home

You will need some help at home for several days to several weeks after discharge. Before your surgery, arrange for a friend, family member or caregiver to provide help at home.

Preparing Your Home

The following tips can make your homecoming more comfortable, and can be addressed before your surgery:

- Rearrange furniture so you can maneuver with a cane, walker, or crutches. You may temporarily change rooms (make the living room your bedroom, for example) to avoid using the stairs.



Prepare a "recovery center" by placing items that you use frequently within easy reach.

- Remove any throw rugs or area rugs that could cause you to slip. Securely fasten electrical cords around the perimeter of the room.
- Get a good chair—one that is firm with a higher-than-average seat and has a footstool for intermittent leg elevation.
- Install a shower chair, gripping bar, and raised toilet seat in the bathroom.
- Use assistive devices such as a long-handled shoehorn, a long-handled sponge, and a grabbing tool or reacher to avoid bending over too far.

Wound Care

During your recovery at home, follow these guidelines to take care of your wound and prevent infection:

- Keep the wound area clean and dry. A dressing will be applied in the hospital and should be changed as often as directed by your doctor. Ask for instructions on how to change the dressing before you leave the hospital.
- Follow your doctor's instructions on how long to wait before you shower or bathe.
- Notify your doctor immediately if the wound appears red or begins to drain. This could be a sign of infection.

Swelling

You may have moderate to severe swelling in the first few days or weeks after surgery. You may have mild to moderate swelling for about 3 to 6 months after surgery. To reduce swelling, elevate your leg slightly and apply ice. Wearing compression stockings may also help reduce swelling. Notify your doctor if you experience new or severe swelling, since this may be the warning sign of a blood clot.

Medication

Take all medications as directed by your doctor. Home medications may include opioid and non-opioid pain pills, oral or injectable blood thinners, stool softeners, and anti-nausea medications.

Be sure to talk to your doctor about all your medications—even over-the-counter drugs, supplements and vitamins. Your doctor will tell you which over-the-counter medicines are safe to take while using prescription pain medication.

It is especially important to prevent any bacterial infections from developing in your artificial joint. Some patients with special circumstances may be required to take antibiotics prior to dental work to help prevent infection. Ask your doctor if you should take antibiotics before dental work. You may also wish to carry a medical alert card so that, if an emergency arises, medical personnel will know that you have an artificial joint.

Diet

By the time you go home from the hospital, you should be eating a normal diet. Your doctor may recommend that you take iron and vitamin supplements. You may also be advised to avoid supplements that include vitamin K and foods rich in vitamin K if you are taking the blood thinner medication warfarin (Coumadin). Foods rich in vitamin K include broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, liver, green beans, garbanzo beans, lentils, soybeans, soybean oil, spinach, kale, lettuce, turnip greens, cabbage, and onions.

Continue to drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol. You should continue to watch your weight to avoid putting more stress on the joint.

Resuming Normal Activities

Once you get home, you should stay active. The key is to not do too much, too soon. While you can expect some good days and some bad days, you should notice a gradual improvement over time. Generally, the following guidelines will apply:

Driving

In most cases, it is safe to resume driving when you are no longer taking opioid pain medication, and when your strength and reflexes have returned to a more normal state. Your doctor will help you determine when it is safe to resume driving.

Sexual Activity

Please consult your doctor about how soon you can safely resume sexual activity. Depending on your condition, you may be able to resume sexual activity within several weeks after surgery.

Sleeping Positions

You can safely sleep on your back, on either side, or on your stomach.

Return to Work

Depending on the type of activities you do on the job and the speed of your recovery, it may take from several days to several weeks before you are able to return to work. Your doctor will advise you when it is safe to resume your normal work activities.

Sports and Exercise

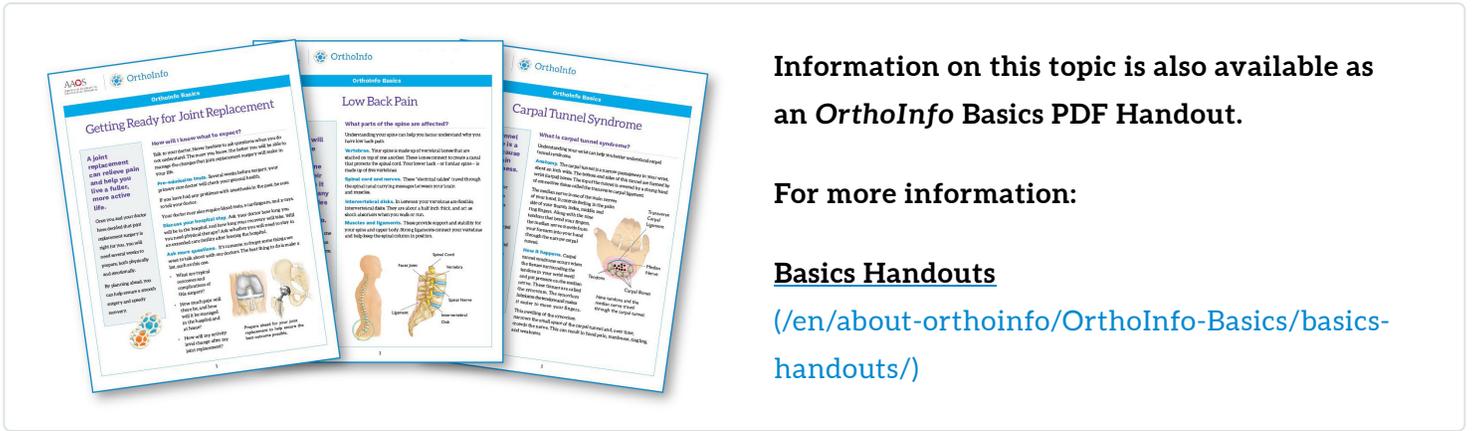
Continue to do the exercises prescribed by your physical therapist for at least 2 months after surgery. In some cases, your doctor may recommend riding a stationary bicycle to help maintain muscle tone and keep your knee flexible. When riding, try to achieve the maximum degree of bending and straightening possible.

As soon as your doctor gives you the go-ahead, you can return to many of the sports activities you enjoyed before your knee replacement.

- Walk as much as you would like, but remember that walking is no substitute for the exercises prescribed by your doctor and physical therapist.
- Swimming is an excellent low-impact activity after a total knee replacement; you can begin swimming as soon as the wound is sufficiently healed. Your doctor will let you know when you can begin.
- In general, lower impact fitness activities such as golfing, bicycling, and light tennis will help increase the longevity of your knee and are preferable over high-impact activities such as jogging, racquetball and skiing.

Air Travel

Pressure changes and immobility may cause your operated leg to swell, especially if it is just healing. Ask your doctor before you travel on an airplane. When going through security, be aware that the sensitivity of metal detectors varies and your artificial joint may cause an alarm. Tell the screener about your artificial joint before going through the metal detector.



Information on this topic is also available as an **OrthoInfo Basics PDF Handout**.

For more information:

Basics Handouts

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Last Reviewed

December 2018

Contributed and/or Updated by

[Jared R.H. Foran, MD](#)

Peer-Reviewed by

[Stuart J. Fischer, MD](#)

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