

Post-Operative FAQs: Hip & Knee Replacement

How long will my joint replacement last?

Most total knee replacements last about 20 years in more than 85% of patients. Most total hip replacements last longer than 20 years in more than 95% of patients.

How long is the recovery period?

It takes most patients three to five months to regain their strength and energy after total joint replacement surgery. You should see continued improvement throughout this period. Refer to your exercise plan and perform the exercises as often as your physician and physical therapist recommend. Your physician may also recommend outpatient physical therapy.

While you're encouraged to get around as much as you're able after surgery, walking or other activities are not a substitute for your exercises.

The sooner you become active, the sooner you will get back to normal. You also need to protect your new joint so it can heal. Plan rest periods frequently throughout the day.

REMEMBER: DO NOT overdo your activities.

How long should I take pain medication?

Pain medication and pain control are an integral part of your recovery from surgery. You should use the pain medication prescribed by your doctor until you are able to function well without it. The duration of pain medication usage can vary widely between individuals after surgery, but in general, most people are able to decrease the use of pain medication over the first few weeks and rarely require opioid medication for longer than 3 months after surgery. Opioid medications can be addictive. Therefore, your surgeon would like you to utilize non-opioid pain medications (Tylenol and NSAIDS) when appropriate.

When can I return to my dentist's office, and do I need to take antibiotics before dental cleaning or other procedures?

Always follow your surgeon's guidance and refrain from undergoing dental cleaning or other non-urgent procedures for three months after your joint replacement surgery. Additionally, orthopedic surgeons have traditionally advised taking a single dose of oral antibiotics one hour before any dental work. This precaution is believed to reduce the risk of serious complications from prosthetic joint infections, while offering the benefit of protection with minimal risk.

Is it normal to feel depressed?

It is not uncommon to have feelings of depression after joint replacement surgery. This may be due to a variety of factors, such as limited mobility, discomfort, increased dependency on others, and medication side effects. Feelings of depression will typically fade as you begin to return to regular activities. If your feelings of depression persist, consult your primary care physician.

When can I drive?

If you had surgery on your right joint, you should not drive for at least 2 weeks. After this time, you may return to driving as soon as you feel comfortable and safe to do so. If you had surgery on your left joint, you may return to driving automatic transmission vehicles as soon as 1 week, if you feel comfortable and safe to do so. Do not drive if you are taking your prescribed pain medications (i.e. opioids, muscle relaxers).

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Is it OK to get my incision wet?

You will be instructed on when you can shower after surgery and remove the dressing. Please do not submerge the area in water by taking baths, swimming, or sitting in a jacuzzi or hot tub for six (6) weeks.

What can I use on my incision to minimize scarring?

Many patients have an interest in using scar creams after surgery. Creams with high Vitamin E content are most effective. For raised scars, you can consider Mederma or Preparation H, both of which are available over the counter. Avoid using scar cream until the incision is completely healed, usually about 6 weeks after surgery.

When will my incision line become less red?

All incisions fade at different rates. This varies according to your own skin tone. It is advisable to keep the incision out of direct sunlight, as this will prolong the process. Most incisions fade by 6-12 months.

When will the swelling go down?

Swelling around the incision area varies post-operatively from patient to patient. For most patients, this area will stay perceptively swollen for 3-9 months after surgery. Don't worry. Most of the swelling will subside with time. However, if the swelling of the entire leg occurs that does not go down with elevation (foot above the level of your heart) or after resting overnight, this may be a sign of a blood clot. Contact your surgeon's office immediately if this should occur.

How long will I have numbness?

Typically, after joint replacement surgery, the outside portion of the incision will have an area of numbness roughly the size of your palm or even larger. The numbness is a normal consequence of surgery and generally resolves in 12-18 months. Occasionally there will be a small area, which varies in size by patient, with some residual numbness over the outside portion of your incision after both hip and knee replacement procedures.

When can I go back to work?

This depends on your profession. Typically, if your work is sedentary, you may return when comfortable. If your work is more rigorous you may require up to 3 months before you can return to full duty. In some cases, more or less time is necessary. Be sure to maintain elevation as recommended, even if you are at work.

How long do I need to go to physical therapy?

Patients will receive in-hospital physical therapy prior to being discharged home. Some patients will also receive 1-2 weeks of in-home physical therapy upon discharge. Some patients may require outpatient physical therapy following total knee or hip replacement surgery. Patients can start outpatient physical therapy when they are done with in-home physical therapy.

Will I set off the security monitors at the airport?

Yes, you will probably set off the alarms as you progress through the security checkpoint. Be proactive and inform security personnel that you have had a joint replacement and will most likely set off the alarm. Wear clothing that will allow you to show them your incision without difficulty. TSA no longer recognizes or accepts joint replacement implant cards for security purposes.

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Can I sleep on my side after surgery?

It is important to follow your surgeon's instructions regarding sleeping positions to promote healing and minimize discomfort. You may sleep on your non-operated side with a firm pillow between your knees to keep pressure off the new joint, keep your legs aligned, and prevent crossing and twisting.

How can I get a good night's sleep after my hip or knee replacement?

Pain and stiffness are the leading causes of sleep disruption after joint replacement. Sleep can be difficult, no matter how many modalities are used to help with sleep patterns. Fortunately, sleep issues can often be managed with proper pain management, occasional use of over-the-counter sleep aids, and adjustments to daily activities. If these strategies aren't enough, reach out to your medical care team to help you manage it during the postoperative period.

How long will I be on a blood thinner?

Various options including pills and injections are available to thin your blood and help prevent phlebitis and blood clots and should be taken for at least 4 weeks after surgery, sometimes longer if prescribed by your surgeon.

Should I apply ice or heat?

Initially, ice is most helpful to keep down swelling and diminish pain. Heat should be avoided for 6 weeks following surgery.

When can I have a pedicure?

Please avoid any pedicures for at least 6 weeks after surgery.

Why does my hip or knee click?

Your hip or knee replacement is made from metal, ceramic, and plastic implants, and they all click at times. The click you hear, or feel, occurs when the bearing surfaces contacting each other during activity. Normal joint surfaces separate and re-contact in normal activity. However, the normal joint surface is covered with a soft substance called cartilage that does not make any perceivable noise. It is normal to hear or feel this clicking sensation after joint replacement surgery, especially early in the recovery, due to the hard surfaces that contact each other.

How long will it take to maximize my range of motion?

It is important to work hard on your range of motion after surgery. For some patients, it can take up to 18 months to 2 years to maximize your range of motion. The amount of motion that you get after knee replacement is dependent on several factors including how much motion you had prior to surgery. It is important to work closely with your physical therapist and your surgeon to ensure that you are meeting all of your range of motion goals.

I think my leg feels longer now. Is this possible?

In the majority of cases, your leg will essentially be unchanged in length as compared to your opposite extremity. In some cases, patients perceive that their leg is lengthened. This is usually the result of straightening out a knee that had a significant deformity before surgery or restoring normal length to a hip replacement. In some instances, it is necessary to lengthen the extremity for the purpose of providing stability to the joint and to avoid dislocation.

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Can I kneel on my knee incision?

Yes, you can kneel on your knee incision once it has healed. You should not kneel on a knee replacement for at least 4 months. In general, kneeling does not damage the knee replacement but can always be a bit uncomfortable. The incision is usually very sensitive for the first 12 months after surgery and may be painful to kneel on. It is always a good idea to use a pillow, cushion, or volleyball knee pad for comfort during prolonged kneeling activities.

How long will my hip or knee stay warm?

Your joint will stay warmer than the non-operative joint for 6-9 months. This is a normal part of the healing process.

Where can I find credible joint care information?

There are several sources of substantiated, peer-reviewed information on hip and knee replacements. The American Association of Hip and Knee Surgeons (www.aahks.org), The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, the National Association for Orthopedic Nurses, and the American College of Rheumatology and the Arthritis Foundation offer a comprehensive, yet patient-friendly review of treatment option. After reviewing information from a credible site, you should discuss it with your physician and develop a treatment plan that best suits your own individual needs.