

## **PATIENT EDUCATION: PAIN**

Coping with pain after surgery doesn't have to mean taking more prescription pain medication. Pain medication certainly has its place in pain management, but there are additional strategies that can help you deal with your surgery pain.

Using a combination of these strategies to control surgery pain can be very helpful and can provide better pain relief than medication alone.

### **Stay ahead of the pain**

Getting ahead of the pain means not waiting until your pain is severe before you take your medication. If you wait until your pain is severe or increasing, it will be more difficult to control your pain, especially after waiting for the medication to be absorbed by your body and take effect.

In the days immediately following your surgery, try taking your pain medication as prescribed by your surgeon. As your pain improves, you can extend the time between doses until you are able to quit using it altogether.

### **Consider non-prescription pain medication**

You don't necessarily have to choose between taking prescription pain medication or no pain medicine. You can use over-the-counter pain medication, with your surgeon's blessing, to take care of pain that is not severe enough to warrant prescription drugs, but not improved enough for no pain medication.

### **Get enough sleep**

Sleep is one of the most important things you can do to control your pain. Adequate sleep improves your ability to cope with pain, speeds healing, and can actually reduce pain. The trick is to reduce your pain enough to sleep well, which may require medication along with proper positioning.

### **Increase physical activity slowly**

What feels good when you are doing it may not feel very good a few hours later. When you are recovering from surgery, feeling better may seem like an invitation to return to your normal activities. Unfortunately, it is very easy to do too much, which increases your pain level and makes it difficult to move forward with your physical activity.

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Increase your physical activity slowly – no more than a few extra minutes per day – until you have truly recovered from your procedure and are able to return your full potential.

### **Don't sit too long**

Sitting or lying in one place for too long can lead to more pain. Getting up and walking every hour or two during the day helps keep you from getting stiff and offers the added benefit of decreasing the risk of developing blood clots after your procedure.

Many people avoid walking because the move from sitting to standing can be a painful one. If your pain is so severe that you are unable to complete simple tasks such as standing and walking, you should consult your surgeon.

### **What would you normally do?**

Just because you had surgery does not mean the ways that you typically control pain won't work. For example, if you find that when you have a normal ache or pain, your pain responds better to ibuprofen (Advil) than naproxen (Aleve), your surgery pain will probably respond similarly. The same is true of heating pads and other pain aids that you might use regularly.

### **Brace your surgery site**

One of the simplest things you can do to prevent surgery pain is to brace your surgical incision. Bracing just means holding your incision/surgery site when you do anything that can cause stress on the site, including standing up, sneezing and coughing. Minimizing the stress on your incision will reduce the pain you feel at the site and reduce your chances of severe complications, like dehiscence and evisceration.

### **Reduce stress**

Stress is the enemy of good pain control. An increase in stress can and often does increase pain. Surgery is a type of physical stress, and while that cannot be avoided, emotional stress can be minimized. Try to avoid situations and even people who tend to increase your stress level in the early days of your recovery. Stress reduction techniques, such as deep breathing and relaxation exercises, can be very beneficial.

### **Avoid aggravating factors**

There is an old joke that goes something like this:

- Patient: "Doctor, it hurts when I do this!"
- Doctor: "Stop doing that!"

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While this is meant to be funny, there is also a grain of truth to it. If lifting your hands above your head hurts, avoid it. Pain is an excellent indicator of activities that you should avoid or limit during your recovery. The "no pain, no gain" adage does not apply to surgery. Some pain may be unavoidable, such as during physical therapy, but avoiding it is a good thing.