

PUTTING

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PAIN AFTER

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SURGERY

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TO REST

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## Introduction

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Pain: It is something we can feel at any time in any place for any reason. And if you are having surgery, the pain you anticipate after the operation may seem hard to face.

Pain is a natural response to surgery, but it is best to prevent pain before it starts: You may not have to experience the discomfort or distress that pain can bring. Pain after surgery can be successfully managed—with the help of doctors, nurses, other healthcare professionals, and *you*.

This brochure is designed to help you better understand pain: How it affects people, the key myths about it, and—most importantly—how pain after surgery can be eased with different techniques and medications.

## Defining Pain

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When we feel pain, we seldom wonder how we sense it: Only that we do. But the typical way we sense pain is a complex process. Certain receptors in our bodies send electrical signals to nerves near the spinal cord. These signals eventually arrive at the brain and are translated as pain.

Basically, there are two types of pain. **Acute pain** usually occurs suddenly and passes quickly. Depending on how severe it is, it can change your heart rate, raise your blood pressure, or cause you to breathe rapidly, among other things. **Chronic pain** can persist or recur over weeks, months, or years. It is often the result of injury, illness, or disease, such as cancer. Chronic pain may not cause the kind of intense feeling that will change your heart rate, blood pressure, or breathing. However, it can cause weight loss, depression, or difficulties in sleeping or eating.

## Giving Feedback on Pain

While there is some common ground in how we sense pain, there are also some differences in how we each feel it. While one person may feel only a dull sensation from an injury, another may feel extreme discomfort. For example, two people who each place a finger on a hot stove may have very different sensations or reactions to it. Each person's ability to tolerate pain depends on several factors, such as previous experiences with pain, the willingness to withstand it, individual moods and personalities, and family or societal conditioning.

Because people experience pain in such different ways, it is important that you give your doctors and nurses feedback on how you feel after surgery. While pain can be monitored through your behavior and vital signs, the best assessment of pain is through direct input from you.



You can also rate your pain on different kinds of scales provided by your caregivers. Examples of pain rating scales include verbal description (rating pain on one end of *none* to *severe*); a numerical rating method (grading pain on a scale of 1 to 10); and a series of face drawings (assessing pain according to happy, frowning, and crying faces). The pain ratings you show on these scales and the discussions you have with your caregivers will help your doctor prescribe the best medications, drug dosages, and therapies for any pain you have after surgery.

## The Importance of Controlling Pain

One of the myths that exist about pain is that it should not be treated but experienced. However, **pain offers no known benefits.**

If it is not treated, pain can affect many different areas of your body, like the heart, stomach, and lungs. Sometimes people try to deal with pain after surgery by taking short breaths, or by holding back coughs to prevent hurting their wounds. These actions can cause other problems, such as the development of infections that are unrelated to the original surgery. Also, undertreated pain may result in increased fear, anxiety, and sleeplessness.



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Ultimately, you should not be afraid to ask your doctors and nurses about handling any pain you may experience after any surgery. Caregivers need your input to determine the most appropriate therapy for any pain you experience.

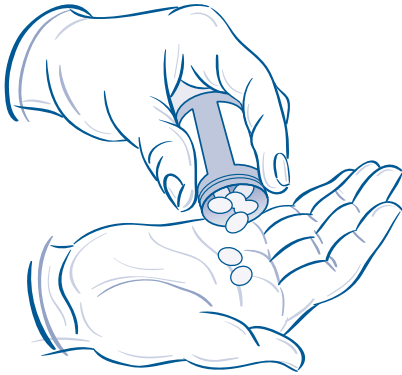
**Remember:** Pain prevention and control bring short- and long-term relief and healing benefits; pain itself does not.



# Handling Pain After Surgery

## ***Controlling Pain With Medications***

Medications used to control pain are called **analgesics**. How your pain after surgery is handled depends in part upon if you are experiencing pain before surgery, and what (if any) analgesics you take for it. The type of analgesia you may be given after surgery will also depend upon the kind of pain you're likely to experience.



## ***Medications for Mild to Moderate Pain***

People who experience pain that is mild or moderately difficult to tolerate may be given nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These analgesics might also be given before an operation to help control pain during surgery. Examples of NSAIDs used in daily life include aspirin and ibuprofen.

NSAIDs can provide effective pain relief, but may cause stomach irritation. This may be lessened by taking NSAID medications with food, or by taking antacids.

## ***Medications for Moderate to Severe Pain***

Pain that is moderate or severe may be controlled with opioids, which can provide fast, effective pain relief. These analgesics, such as codeine, morphine, and oxycodone, may be

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used alone or given with NSAIDs to ease pain. Side effects associated with opioids include constipation, drowsiness, and nausea.

Some may believe that taking opioids will lead to addiction. However, studies have shown that addiction to opioids for pain treatment following surgery is very rare.

Sometimes people who take opioids for more than a few days develop a tolerance to them. If you become tolerant of your pain medicine, you may find that it is not as effective in giving pain relief as it once was. If that occurs, it is important to tell your caregivers about it: Your doctor may adjust your dosage accordingly.

People who take opioids for pain may also experience certain symptoms if their medication is suddenly stopped. These symptoms can be avoided if the drug dosage is gradually lowered instead. Taking opioids according to your doctor's instructions will help you avoid those symptoms and get safe, effective relief from pain.

### ***Controlling Pain Without Medications***

Pain after surgery can be managed in many ways—both with and without medications. Some methods of handling pain without drugs include massage, deep-heating ultrasound, and acupuncture.

Pain can also be lessened with certain relaxation techniques, such as listening to music or resting the jaw from a tense position. Biofeedback, hypnosis, or concentrating on positive imagery are some other helpful approaches in easing pain. Your doctor may be able to recommend these or other useful nondrug methods that can help ease your pain.

## Pain Medication Delivery Methods

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Analgesics can be given in various ways, including:

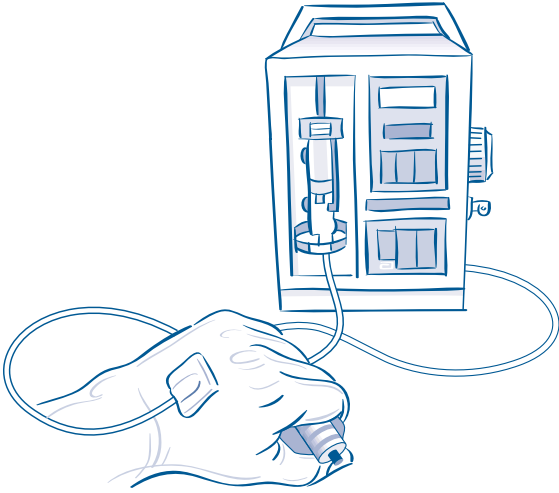
- by mouth
- intravenously (into a vein)
- through injections
- on the skin
- via the rectum

One method of intravenous pain control used after surgery is **patient-controlled analgesia (PCA)**. PCA enables people to control medication intravenously through a special pump. If you use PCA, you press the patient pendant button to receive medication. PCA pumps are programmed to make sure you only get the amount of medication you need within a period of time. In addition, your doctors and nurses monitor the dosages to make sure you are getting the right amount.

Pain relief medication can also be delivered through an **intraspinal** process. In this method, the drug is given through a needle or in a thin tube called a **catheter**, which is inserted in certain spaces around the spinal cord. One type of intraspinal drug delivery is **epidural analgesia**. Most people may be familiar with epidural analgesia because of its use for women who are delivering their babies.

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NSAIDs and opioids can be administered through many of the methods listed above. Each of these and other pain control methods offer unique benefits. With your input, your doctor will be able to determine which method will be best for you.



## Finally...

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Whatever the method used to control your pain after your operation, remember it is best to prevent pain before it starts. It is important to talk to your doctors and nurses about the different medications and techniques available to handle pain after the surgery. After your operation, be sure to follow your doctor's instructions for whatever pain control you're given. And most importantly, do not be afraid to communicate how well it works for you. Doing so will not only give you peace of mind and body; it may help improve your recovery from surgery.





## Glossary

**Acute pain:** Sudden, relatively brief pain.

**Analgesic:** Pain-relieving medication.

**Catheter:** Long tube inserted into the body to allow fluid to pass into it.

**Chronic pain:** Recurring pain, or pain that persists for several weeks after initial injury or illness. Also refers to pain resulting from long-term diseases, such as cancer.

**Epidural analgesia:** Method of pain management in which medication is given through a needle or catheter inserted in the epidural space located near the spinal cord.

**Intraspinal analgesia:** Pain control method in which a needle or catheter is inserted near the spinal cord.

**Opioids:** Narcotic class of drugs typically used to manage moderate to severe pain.

**NSAID:** Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug; a type of non-narcotic analgesia used to manage mild to moderate pain.

**PCA:** Patient-controlled analgesia. A pain management method in which patients control how much pain medication they receive.

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