

Managing Pain After Surgery: Acetaminophen, Ibuprofen, and Opioids

What pain can I expect after surgery?

It is normal to have some pain after surgery. The goal of managing your pain after surgery is to lower the pain enough to feel comfortable getting up, taking deep breaths, washing, get dressed, and doing simple tasks in your home.

- After knee surgery or gallbladder removal, pain is usually the worst in the first 24-48 hours.
- After tonsil removal, pain usually lasts 7-10 days and it can last up to 2 weeks. The pain may also get worse several days after surgery from inflammation (swelling and redness).

How do I manage pain after surgery?

- For pain control during the first 48 hours after your surgery, use pain medications such as **acetaminophen** (brand name Tylenol®) and **ibuprofen** (Motrin® or Advil®) around-the-clock, even if there is no pain. **Around-the-clock** means to take the medication on a set schedule rather than taking them as needed, and to wake up at night to take these medications.
- Make sure to drink lots of fluids and eat. Special foods such as ice cream, popsicles, pudding, and yogurt can help with pain control and distraction.
- You can also use other distraction techniques to manage pain. These include spending time with family, playing or doing special projects, watching favorite shows or movies, and using a cold or warm pack.

What medications will I take?

Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and ibuprofen (Motrin® or Advil®) are strong pain relievers. How much you take (your dose) depends on your body weight. You should use a syringe or dropper to measure all liquid medication. Please do not use a spoon.

Do not give acetaminophen or ibuprofen more often or in higher doses than recommended. If you have questions on how much is safe to give, ask your surgical team or pharmacist.

What is my schedule for taking these pain medications around-the-clock?

The best strategy for controlling pain after surgery is around-the-clock pain control with acetaminophen and ibuprofen for 48 hours (2 days) after surgery. Take a dose of pain medication every 3 hours, so you are **alternating** these medications (taking them at different times) for the best pain management.

- After 48 hours, you may need to keep using these medications on a schedule during the day, but you may not need to wake up at night to take medication.

Example medication schedule:

- Start with a dose of acetaminophen.
- 3 hours later, give a dose of ibuprofen.
- 3 hours later, give a dose of acetaminophen (6 hours after the last dose of acetaminophen).
- 3 hours later, give a dose of ibuprofen (6 hours after the last dose of ibuprofen).

Here's an example timetable of how you might follow this schedule:

Time	Medication dose
9:00 AM	Acetaminophen dose
12:00 PM (Noon)	Ibuprofen dose
3:00 PM	Acetaminophen dose
6:00 PM	Ibuprofen dose
9:00 PM	Acetaminophen dose
12:00 AM (Midnight)	Ibuprofen dose
3:00 AM	Acetaminophen dose
6:00 AM	Ibuprofen dose

How do I keep track of when to take pain medications?

Use the table at the end of this handout to keep track of taking your pain medications.

What if I still have pain?

- If your pain is not controlled with acetaminophen and ibuprofen, you may have what is called **“breakthrough” pain**. This may happen if you fall behind on the pain medication schedule, or if you are not drinking enough fluids. Try offering liquids or foods, distraction techniques, or cold or heating pads.
- We have given you a small amount of an opioid pain medication (oxycodone or hydromorphone). If your other medications and distraction techniques aren’t working to control your pain, you can use the opioid medication. Do not use the opioid medication to prevent pain or help with sleep, as this can cause overdose and breathing problems.
 - Continue to use acetaminophen, ibuprofen, distraction techniques, and liquids even if you are taking opioid medication. Adults caring for kids under 18 years should watch them take their opioid

medication, to make sure they use it correctly and to keep it from being used in the wrong way.

- If you're taking opioids, you could also take an over-the-counter stool softener such as MiraLAX® (polyethylene glycol) to avoid constipation. You can get this at your local pharmacy without a prescription.
- If you still have uncontrolled pain after trying all of these steps, call our staff at (734) 936-4000. We will help make sure your pain is managed in the best way possible.

Where should I store prescription medications like opioids?

Store prescription medications out of sight and out of the reach of children, teens, and pets.

- Store them in private areas, rather than common rooms like bathrooms or kitchens.
- Lock up the medication if possible.
- Keep a count of how many pills or doses you have left.

How should I get rid of old or extra prescription medications?

- The safest way to get rid of medications is to return them. You can take them to an authorized medication take-back program. Visit bit.ly/USDOJMedTakeBack to find a location near you.
- If you have a medication disposal envelope or drug disposal kit, follow the instructions to dispose of the unused medication.
- If taking the medications to a take-back location or using a disposal kit is not possible, then follow these steps as a last option:
 - Mix the pills (do not crush) with used coffee grounds or kitty litter in a plastic bag.
 - Scratch out any personal information on the prescription label.

- Throw out the mixture and the original pill container in your household trash.

When can I return to school or work?

Once your pain is well-controlled, you are safe to return to school, daycare, or work. Please work with your school or work on accommodations if you have any movement or lifting restrictions after your surgery. Contact the clinic if your school or work needs documentation for these accommodations.

Who do I call if I have any questions or problems?

Call your surgeon's office if you have any questions or problems, or if you are still having pain after 14 days.

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Author: Catherine Sulich
Reviewers: Sarah Clark, Mark Bicket, MD PhD
Edited by: Brittany Batell, MPH MSW CHES®

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