

Recovery & Aftercare

Patient Education Resource

Recovery from cancer surgery takes time, and every patient heals at a different pace. This guide provides general timelines and practical advice to help you know what to expect and when to seek help.

1. Typical Recovery Timelines

Recovery varies depending on the type of surgery. Below are general estimates for common surgical oncology procedures:

- **Minimally invasive (laparoscopic / robotic):** Hospital stay 2–4 days; return to light activity in 2–3 weeks; full recovery 4–6 weeks
- **Open abdominal surgery:** Hospital stay 5–10 days; return to light activity in 4–6 weeks; full recovery 8–12 weeks
- **Major hepatic or pancreatic surgery:** Hospital stay 7–14 days; return to light activity in 6–8 weeks; full recovery 3–4 months

Your surgeon will provide a personalized timeline based on your specific procedure and overall health.

2. Pain Management

Some pain and discomfort after surgery is normal and expected. The goal is to keep your pain at a manageable level so you can rest, breathe deeply, and move safely.

- **Multimodal approach:** Your team will likely use a combination of medications — acetaminophen, anti-inflammatory drugs, and limited narcotics — to control pain while minimizing side effects
- **Take medications on schedule:** Staying ahead of pain is more effective than waiting until it becomes severe
- **Ice packs:** Apply near (not directly on) your incision for 15–20 minutes at a time to reduce swelling
- **Splint your incision:** Hold a pillow against your abdomen when coughing, laughing, or getting up — this reduces pain and protects the incision
- **Weaning off narcotics:** Begin transitioning to over-the-counter pain relievers as soon as your surgeon advises; narcotics can cause constipation and drowsiness

3. Activity Restrictions

First 2 weeks:

- Walk short distances several times a day — this prevents blood clots and promotes healing
- No lifting anything heavier than 10 pounds (about a gallon of milk)

- No driving while taking narcotic pain medications
- Avoid stairs when possible; take them slowly one step at a time if needed

Weeks 2–6:

- Gradually increase walking distance and light activity
- No heavy lifting (over 15–20 pounds), strenuous exercise, or abdominal exercises
- You may resume driving once you are off narcotics and can turn/brake comfortably (typically 2–3 weeks)
- No swimming or submerging incisions in water until fully healed

After 6 weeks:

- Most patients can return to normal activity, including work (discuss with your surgeon)
- Gradually resume exercise; start with walking and low-impact activities before returning to full workouts
- Lifting restrictions may continue for 8–12 weeks after major open surgery

4. Wound Care

- Keep incisions clean and dry. You may shower 48 hours after surgery (let water run over the incision; do not scrub)
- Do not apply creams, ointments, or lotions to the incision unless instructed
- Surgical glue or adhesive strips (Steri-Strips) will fall off on their own — do not peel them
- Inspect your incision daily for signs of infection (see below)
- If you have a drain at home, empty and record output as instructed; report changes in color or volume
- Staples or sutures are typically removed at your first follow-up visit (7–14 days)

5. When to Call Your Surgeon

Contact your surgical team immediately if you experience any of the following:

- Fever over 101.5 °F (38.6 °C)
- Increasing redness, swelling, warmth, or drainage from your incision
- Foul-smelling wound drainage or pus
- Pain that is worsening instead of improving, or not controlled by medications
- Persistent nausea, vomiting, or inability to keep fluids down for more than 24 hours
- No bowel movement for 3 or more days, or new abdominal distension
- Shortness of breath, chest pain, or calf swelling (possible blood clot — seek emergency care)
- Any sudden change in your condition that concerns you

When in doubt, call. Your surgical team would rather hear from you early than have a complication go unaddressed.

This resource is for educational purposes only and does not replace individualized medical advice. Always follow the specific instructions provided by your surgical team.