



# **Pain Control after Surgery**

A Resource Guide for Patients



MASSACHUSETTS  
GENERAL HOSPITAL

**ORTHOPAEDICS**



**HARVARD**  
MEDICAL SCHOOL

# Welcome

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Dear Patient,

You and your doctor have decided that spine surgery is a good choice for your back problems. Most people who have spine surgery have had pain for some time and non-surgical treatments, such as medicines and exercises, have not helped with the pain. The goal of spine surgery is to help you with pain and movement so you can once again do the things that are important to you. Although pain treatments may not take away all of your pain, many people are able to lower their pain enough to function better and enjoy life.

After surgery, it will take time for you to improve. It may take weeks or even months to feel better than you did before surgery. To help manage your pain during recovery, you will use both pain medicine and non-drug techniques. This guide will help you learn about both methods.

Some strong prescription pain medicines, called narcotics, may make the pain better at first, but they can actually make pain worse and create serious problems if used incorrectly or for a long time. Non-drug pain relief methods do not cause serious problems that narcotics can cause. Many non-drug methods work better with time and practice. In time, you may be able to manage your pain using non-drug methods with little or no medicine at all.

We encourage you to use this guide to learn about using pain medicine safely. We hope that you will try several of the non-drug pain relief methods introduced in this guide. Practice some every day before your surgery to help you get good at them. Then continue using them after surgery. We at the Spine Center want to work with you to find the best ways to help relieve your pain.

Orthopaedic Spine Center  
Massachusetts General Hospital

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This workbook is intended as an educational supplement to your regular ongoing care. It is not a substitute for professional medical care.

# Taking control of your pain

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## Regaining control of your life

Although back pain is very common, your pain is unique to you.

Pain is a very personal experience that affects you differently than others. If you have had pain for a long time, you probably have noticed how it has changed you physically, emotionally, and socially. This can affect every aspect of your life.

We will work closely with you as a team to provide the best possible treatments and advice for your pain. We hope that you will partner with us in your care and follow your treatment plan as recommended. Let us know what works and what is not working for you. This includes letting us know what has helped you cope with pain in the past. That way, we can help you achieve the three most important pain treatment goals:

1. Get relief from pain
2. Improve your emotional response to pain
3. Improve your ability to carry out daily activities

The information in this booklet and the tools you can get by clicking on imbedded links will help you get started.



# Understanding your pain

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Pain is a natural part of living whether you are healthy or not. It is a warning system that is protective, unless it persists even after an illness or injury has healed.

Keep track of your pain and treatment plan with these tools:

- [Keep track of your pain](#)
- [Keep track of your medicines](#)
- [Keep track of the health care team](#)
- [Keep track of non-drug methods that help](#)



## Treating your pain after spine surgery

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You should expect to have some pain after your surgery. Pain relief is an important part of your treatment. This will help you feel more comfortable, move around sooner and heal faster.

There are many ways to treat pain. We will help you come up with a pain treatment plan that works for you. While it may not be possible to take away all your pain, we can help you reach a pain level that will allow you to do many everyday things. Your plan will change as your pain improves or if it becomes worse.

**Let us know if your pain gets worse and stops you from doing your regular daily activities like bathing and dressing. We may need to change your pain plan.**



Many people find setting a small goal each day, really helps them gain the momentum needed to accomplish their ultimate goals. Some people set unrealistically high or vague goals that can never be fully achieved. Thus “SMART” goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) are important to track your progress, while guiding future goals and activities. An example of a SMART goal is: “I want to have lunch with my two best friends in 3 months without being limited by pain.” [Read more](#)

# Medicine used for treating pain after surgery

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The most common way to treat pain is with pain medicine. Each type of pain medicine has benefits and risks. What takes away your pain might not work or be safe for someone else. We will work with you to find the safest, helpful regimen to treat your pain.

It is important to take your pain medicine exactly as you are told. Depending on how well you are doing with your recovery, we may suggest that you take your medicine in different ways such as:

- on a set schedule to keep steady levels in your system,
- before starting an activity (like physical therapy), or
- only if needed when pain is not relieved by other methods

Common over-the-counter and prescription pain medicine include:

## Over-the-counter pain medicines

**Acetaminophen (Tylenol, Panadol):** is a type of medicine that helps with fever, headaches, minor aches and pains. It can also help stronger pain medicines work better. Don't take more than 4,000mg per day. Ask your professional to help you figure out which medicines you take that contain acetaminophen so you don't get too much.

**NSAIDs (NonSteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs like Aleve/Advil):** help with fever, pain, and swelling. NSAIDs are safe for most people when taken daily for a week or two. Check with your doctor before taking NSAIDs, as they may cause risks during surgery or interfere with healing afterwards. NSAIDs are generally avoided in those with certain health problems and after some types of fusion surgery.



# Medicine used for treating pain after surgery

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## Prescription pain medicines

**Neuropathic pain medicines (Lyrica, Neurontin, Cymbalta, etc):** help with muscle and nerve pain. Often they work best after a few weeks of daily use, but sometimes are used briefly just before and after surgery to help limit the dose of narcotics needed.

**Narcotic pain medicines (Dilaudid, Percocet, Vicodin, etc):** are stronger pain medicines that work well to lessen severe pain. Many people take some narcotic pain medicine after spine surgery. They do not take pain completely away, but can make it manageable.

If you have been taking narcotics before surgery, the amount you take over time is lowered slowly. Follow the plan to do this safely.

## Tips on using narcotics safely

Narcotics are safe and work well for pain if you take them as you were told. However, side effects, accidents, addiction, or death by overdose can happen especially if they are taken incorrectly. Follow the tips below on how to safely use, store, and dispose narcotics. They can help prevent harm to yourself and others.

To learn more about safe use and safe storage of narcotics:

- [Truth about Painkillers](#)
- [Taking Pain Meds Safely](#)
- [Safely Dispose of Pain Medicines](#)

Read more about [taking pain meds safely](#).

## Rules for filling narcotic prescriptions

If you will need narcotic pain medicine for more than 7 days, there are state laws and hospital policies to follow, including:

- Your first prescription may be limited to a 7-day supply,
- You must show a photo ID when you pick the medicine up,
- Call your prescriber's office 2 days before you need a refill
- The pharmacist can dispense fewer than prescribed pills if you think too many are ordered



## What helps in addition to meds after surgery?

Standards of medical care, guided by research, now show that medicine used to control pain have a short-term benefit, but lose effectiveness and cause harm when used for long periods or in high doses. There are many safer, non-drug methods that people use alone, or in combination with medicine.



You and your team will work together to find the best combination to manage your pain, restore your activity levels and avoid the harms of ongoing or high dose medicine. Following surgery, pain coping methods targeting both the body and the mind should be combined to best control your pain and improve your recovery.

Pain coping methods that target the body include:

- Careful selection, use and monitoring of pain medicines
- Safely cooling (and later heating) the painful area
- Activity as guided by Physical Therapy and your team
  - No bending, arching your back, twisting, or lifting
  - Avoid prolonged sitting
  - Frequent short walks, and slow, gentle movements
- Positioning for comfort and frequent repositioning
- Good nutrition, fresh air, and adequate sleep

# Coping with thoughts & feelings that affect pain

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Pain is a uniquely individual experience, affecting people at a personal level. In addition to the medicine and non-drug methods described, coping with unhelpful thoughts and feelings also help control pain.



- Know what to expect during your recovery
- Remain cautiously optimistic about your recovery
  - Being overly optimistic may result in trying too much, too soon, that may result in set-backs
  - Being overly pessimistic increases pain and strong emotions, or can instill a sense of helplessness.
- Relaxation, and stress reduction techniques help
  - Recovering from surgery and pain is stressful
- Taking your mind off your pain with music, books, puzzles, TV or pleasant conversations can help you cope.
- Let go of strong emotions and upsetting thoughts
- The company of others, prayer or meditation can help.

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## Specific non-drug pain relief after surgery

We want you to try non-drug ways that help with pain in addition to your prescribed medicine. Check with us before using these methods, because sometimes, we may want you to delay their use, depending on your specific surgery. Let us know if you try one of these methods and it makes you feel worse instead of better.

Physical methods work in different ways to help lower pain. Some directly treat the area where you feel pain. Others send painless signals to the brain to fight off pain signals.

### **Cooling or heating the painful area**

Use heat or cold, whichever makes you feel better. Cold is better than heat the first few days after surgery. Cold slows down blood flow to the painful area and reduces swelling and muscle spasms. Heat increases blood flow to the painful area to help with muscle spasms and pain. [Read more ...](#)

### **Body positioning and movement**

Right after surgery, keeping the back in straight position that follows its natural curves is best. Pillows will help you find a comfortable position with less stress on your back. Bending, twisting, lifting or arching your back is prohibited at first. You will be taught to “log roll” in bed, and a way to sit, and stand up without straining your back. The best exercise in the days and weeks after surgery is walking. Then, body mechanics will be taught to protect and strengthen your back as you become more active. Sitting or staying still for more than 30-40 minutes can cause pain and stiffness, so keep moving as instructed!

## **Non-drug back pain relief: mind-body methods**

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Pain is an unpleasant bodily and emotional experience. The mind-body connection is clear as for most people, the stronger the pain, the more upset they become. It is also true that strong emotions, or upsetting thoughts make pain worse.

The opposite is also true: your mind can have a positive effect on pain. Having a positive outlook might help you handle pain or stress better, making it less bothersome. Mind-body pain relief methods take advantage of this positive effect.

### **Distraction**

Distraction can help with pain by having your mind focus on something other than your pain. Try doing something that you enjoy or find relaxing. Activities that work for some people include:

- watching TV,
- listening to music,
- reading or listening to a book,
- playing a game, doing a puzzle or even counting.



Distraction works as long as it holds your attention & takes your mind off of the pain. It is a good method to try if it is too soon to take your pain pill or if your pain lasts only a few minutes. Use the method you like best.

## Relaxation & meditation techniques

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Relaxation and meditation techniques help to reduce pain and its negative effects on the mind and body. Long term pain can cause changes in your brain. Relaxation and meditation may help reverse these changes.



Relaxation techniques can be as simple as focusing on your breathing, relaxing your jaw or relaxing different muscle groups.

Imagery, hypnosis and meditation methods use focused attention and mental images to help calm and relax you.

These methods help reduce stress, but to relieve pain, they work best after a period of daily practice. Start doing them before surgery and continue at least daily after surgery. Start practicing by using one of the following methods at least once a day:

[Relaxing with Ocean Sounds](#)

[Become Relaxed in a Safe Place](#)

# Wellness despite pain: getting stronger everyday

Wellness-oriented methods that help people with pain include:

## Better Sleep Patterns

Pain often interrupts sleep. A lack of deep sleep increases pain, which in turn interferes with sleep. Break the pattern with better sleep. [Learn more](#)

At Home	In Hospital
Consistent wake time	Limit early morning light/noise
Bright light in the morning for 30 minutes	Bright light in the morning for 30 minutes
Use bed only for sleep or sexual activity	Avoid doing painful procedures in bed
Limit daytime napping to 20-30 minutes	Limit daytime nap duration to 90 minutes
Exercise 30-40 minutes per day	Daytime activity appropriate to condition
Avoid evening caffeine, alcohol, nicotine	Avoid evening caffeine, alcohol, nicotine
Avoid large, spicy or fatty snacks	Avoid large, spicy or fatty evening snacks
Bath 1-2 hours before bed time	PM Care with back rub if desired
Adjust temperature for cooling trend	Limit ambient light and noise as possible
Allow 30-60 minutes for bedtime routine	Night routine that limits interruptions
Reduce exposure to noise and lights	Read or relaxing music, not TV if awoken
Turn clock away or remove from bedside	Promote physical/emotional comfort
If awake** read or relaxing music, not TV	

## Pain-fighting foods

A variety of dietary approaches help relieve pain. Weight loss for overweight persons or dietary supplements (vitamins, minerals, herbs and amino acids) alleviate many types of pain. After surgery, a diet that quiets inflammation can help. Avoid fried and highly processed foods that fuel inflammation. Olive oil, certain spices, salmon, berries, citric fruits and pineapples have inflammation-fighting properties. Although most are best studied for arthritis, they also work for other pains. If you are interested in learning more about pain-fighting food, search online for information on herbal preparations, vitamins and foods that fight inflammation. [More...](#)

## Online resources

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- [Understanding different types of back pain](#) (video - 12 min)
- [Understand acute & chronic pain differences](#) (video - 5 min)
- [2018 Pain Resource Guide](#) compiled annually by ACPA
- [Brief Breathe-2-relax app](#) (iOS 7.0 or later device)
- [Explore a variety of tools and techniques to manage pain](#)
- [Mindfulness app for many uses](#) (iPhone or Android)
- [Choose calming sounds & set the timer](#) (iPhone or Android)
- [Learn stress relief methods to lower pain](#)
- [Learn to use humor to resolve conflict without hurting feelings](#)
- [Read about 11 Chronic Pain Control Techniques for Back Pain](#)
- [Try many different meditations in many languages & categories](#)
- [Demonstration of how acupuncture works](#) (video – 5 min)
- [TENS \(electrical stimulation\) for back pain](#) (video - 1 min)
- [General definitions & information about complementary therapy](#)
- [Read about complementary approaches to treating pain](#)
- [Explore a few meditation options](#)
  - [Different types of meditation and uses explained](#) (scroll to Q&A)
  - [Guided Relaxation with Scenic Pictures](#) (5 minute)
  - [Guided Relaxation with Scenic Pictures](#) (10 minute)
  - [Guided Relaxation with Scenic Pictures](#) (15 minute)
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Apps are emerging (iPad or [Android](#))
- American Chronic Pain Association [Pain Management Tools](#)
- Arthritis Foundation [Pain information](#):