

Recovering From Total Knee Replacement

What You Need to Know

What Is a Total Knee Replacement?

A total knee replacement (TKR), also called total knee arthroplasty, is a surgical procedure in which the damaged surfaces of the knee joint are removed and replaced with metal and plastic components that replicate the function of a healthy knee. It is most commonly performed for severe knee osteoarthritis that has stopped responding to conservative treatment.

TKR is one of the most successful and commonly performed orthopedic surgeries in the United States, with over 700,000 procedures performed each year. The vast majority of patients experience dramatic and lasting reduction in pain and improvement in function.

What Can I Expect After Surgery?

Days 1–3: Hospital recovery

- Walking with a walker begins the day of or day after surgery
- Physical therapy starts in the hospital — range of motion and basic strengthening
- Pain and swelling are significant — ice, elevation, and medication help
- Blood clot prevention (compression stockings, medication, movement) is a priority

Weeks 1–4: Early home recovery

- Walking with an assistive device, gradually increasing distance
- Outpatient physical therapy begins — typically 2–3 sessions per week
- Key goal: achieve 0° extension (fully straight) and 90°+ flexion (bend) by week 4
- Driving is typically not permitted for 4–6 weeks

Weeks 4–12: Progressive rehabilitation

- Strengthening the quadriceps, hamstrings, and hip muscles
- Stationary cycling is introduced — excellent for range of motion
- Stair climbing, balance training, and functional activities progress
- Most patients are walking independently by 6 weeks

Months 3–6 and beyond

- Continued strength and endurance improvements
- Return to most recreational activities by 3–6 months
- Swelling may persist for up to 12 months — this is normal

Important Precautions

- No high-impact activities (running, jumping) — protect the implant long term
- Avoid kneeling directly on the replaced knee when possible
- Watch for blood clot signs: calf pain, redness, swelling, or shortness of breath — seek emergency care
- Report any signs of infection: fever, increasing redness, warmth, or discharge from the incision
- Inform all future healthcare providers (including dentists) that you have a knee implant

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Sudden severe increase in pain or swelling
- Calf pain or swelling — possible blood clot (DVT)
- Shortness of breath or chest pain — seek emergency care immediately
- Fever, chills, or signs of wound infection
- A clicking, popping, or grinding that is new or worsening

How Physical Therapy Maximizes Your Outcome

Physical therapy is the single most important factor in the success of your total knee replacement after the surgery itself. Restoring range of motion quickly, building quad strength, and learning to move properly are what separate good outcomes from great ones. Patients who engage fully and consistently with their PT program return to their activities faster and with better long-term function.

Most patients reach their primary functional goals within **3 to 6 months**, with ongoing improvement for up to a year.

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