NICHOLAS L. STRASSER, MD
FOOT & ANKLE SURGERY
(615) 936-7846
nickstrassermd.com

PATIENT INSTRUCTIONS

General Foot and Ankle Postoperative Instructions

Recovering After Foot and Ankle Surgery

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> These are general instructions and do not replace individualized medical advice. Your recovery depends on the procedure performed and your individual health. Always follow the specific instructions from your surgeon, which take precedence over this document.

Recovering After Foot and Ankle Surgery

Surgery on the foot and ankle requires careful recovery because the bones, tendons, and ligaments in this area support your entire body weight. Following your postoperative instructions carefully will help protect your surgical repair, reduce pain, and improve healing.

Most patients experience pain, swelling, and limited mobility during the first several weeks after surgery. These symptoms gradually improve with time.

YOUR RECOVERY WILL DEPEND ON

- The type of surgery performed
- Whether additional procedures were done
- Your ability to follow postoperative instructions
- Your overall health and healing capacity

Pain Management After Surgery

Moderate pain is expected after foot and ankle surgery. Pain medications are prescribed to make discomfort manageable while your body heals. Pain control works best when multiple methods are used together.

PAIN MEDICATION SHOULD ALLOW YOU TO

Pain medication will not eliminate pain completely, but it should allow you to:

- Sleep comfortably
- Move safely around your home
- Perform simple daily activities

ELEVATION

The most important way to control pain and swelling is keeping your leg elevated above the level of your heart. For the first two weeks after surgery:

- Elevate your leg **at least 22 hours per day**
- Keep your foot above heart level
- Sleep with your leg elevated when possible

This reduces swelling and significantly improves comfort.

ICE THERAPY

Ice can help decrease inflammation and pain. Apply ice for:

- 30 minutes at a time
- Several times per day

Always protect your skin from direct contact with ice.

Understanding Nerve Blocks

Many patients receive a regional nerve block before surgery. A nerve block temporarily numbs the nerves in the leg and foot. This provides excellent pain control immediately after surgery and may last 12–24 hours, sometimes longer.

WHAT TO EXPECT

While the nerve block is working you may notice:

- Complete numbness in the foot
- Temporary inability to move your toes
- A heavy or “asleep” feeling in the leg

This is normal and expected.

REBOUND PAIN

As the nerve block wears off, some patients experience rebound pain, which can feel like a sudden increase in discomfort. This occurs because:

- The block is fading
- Surgical inflammation becomes noticeable

To reduce rebound pain:

- Begin taking pain medication **before** the block fully wears off
- Continue elevating your leg
- Use ice therapy

Rebound pain typically improves within 12–24 hours.

TEMPORARY NUMBNESS

Some patients experience lingering numbness or tingling after surgery. This may occur due to:

- The nerve block
- Local swelling around nerves
- Surgical irritation of small sensory nerves

In most cases, sensation gradually returns over weeks to months.

Side Effects of Pain Medication

COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

- Nausea
- Itching
- Constipation

You may take diphenhydramine (Benadryl) for itching if needed.

NAUSEA MEDICATION

You may also have been prescribed medication for nausea such as:

- Ondansetron (Zofran)
- Promethazine (Phenergan)

Important: Pain medications can be addictive. Begin reducing your use as soon as pain allows. Some patients only need medication for a few days, while others may require it for several weeks depending on the procedure.

Preventing Blood Clots

After surgery, reduced movement can increase the risk of blood clots. To help prevent this:

Take **Aspirin 325 mg once daily with food for 30 days**, beginning the day after surgery. If you cannot take aspirin, discuss alternatives with your physician.

Moving your toes and knee frequently can also help promote circulation.

Non-Weight Bearing: Protecting Your Surgery

Many foot and ankle surgeries require a period of non-weight bearing (NWB). This means **no weight** can be placed on the surgical foot. Even small amounts of weight can disrupt healing or damage surgical repairs.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Bones and tendons take time to heal. Putting weight on the foot too early may cause:

- Surgical failure
- Broken implants
- Poor healing
- Need for additional surgery

HELPFUL TIPS

- Keep pathways in your home clear
- Use a backpack or bag to carry items
- Sit while performing daily tasks when possible
- Move slowly and carefully

Your surgeon will tell you when it is safe to begin weight bearing.

USE ASSISTIVE DEVICES CONSISTENTLY

- Crutches
- Walker
- Knee scooter
- iWALK device

Dressings, Splints, and Casts

YOU MAY LEAVE SURGERY WITH

- A splint
- A cast
- A soft surgical dressing
- A walking boot

IMPORTANT INSTRUCTIONS

If placed in a splint or cast: Do not remove it until your follow-up appointment.

If you have a soft surgical dressing: This may be removed 5 days after surgery. After removal:

- Cover the incision with clean gauze
- Keep the area clean and dry

If Steri-Strips are present: Leave them in place until they fall off naturally or are removed at your follow-up visit.

Swelling and Drainage

Swelling is very common after foot and ankle surgery and may persist for several months. Some mild drainage or spotting on the dressing is normal during the first 1–2 days. Bruising around the surgical area is also common and will gradually resolve.

IF THE DRESSING BECOMES SATURATED

- Reinforce with clean gauze
- Contact your physician if drainage persists longer than 2–3 days

Activity and Movement

AFTER SURGERY YOU SHOULD

- Go home and rest
- Keep your leg elevated
- Limit unnecessary activity

KEEP OTHER JOINTS MOVING

You should still gently move joints that are not immobilized. If allowed by your dressing, move your:

- Toes
- Knee

- Hip

This helps prevent stiffness and improves circulation.

Bathing and Wound Care

You may shower, but the dressing must remain **completely dry**. Use a sealed waterproof covering over the leg. If the dressing has been removed, you may gently wash the leg in the shower.

DO NOT

- Apply ointments to the incision
- Soak the leg in baths
- Use hot tubs or pools

Submerging the surgical site is not allowed until the incision is fully healed, usually 3–4 weeks after surgery.

Driving After Surgery

Driving depends on which foot was operated on.

LEFT FOOT SURGERY

You may drive when pain allows if your car has an automatic transmission and you are no longer taking narcotic pain medication.

RIGHT FOOT SURGERY

You may drive only after you are:

- Fully weight bearing
- Off narcotic medications
- Able to safely perform an emergency stop

You cannot drive while wearing a walking boot. Always check with your insurance provider before returning to driving.

Physical Therapy and Recovery

Physical therapy typically begins 4–6 weeks after surgery, depending on your procedure.

EARLY THERAPY FOCUSES ON

- Reducing swelling
- Restoring joint motion
- Improving walking mechanics

LATER THERAPY FOCUSES ON

- Strength
- Balance
- Return to activity

RECOVERY TIMELINES

Recovery timelines vary depending on the surgery performed.

- Low-impact activities such as biking and swimming may begin around 8 weeks.
- Return to higher-impact activities such as running may take 4–6 months.
- Full recovery may take 6–12 months, depending on the procedure.

When to Contact Our Office

PLEASE CALL IMMEDIATELY IF YOU EXPERIENCE

- Fever greater than 101°F

- Increasing redness around the incision
- Persistent drainage
- Severe calf pain or cramping
- Excessive swelling
- Worsening pain that does not improve with medication

Our Commitment to Your Recovery

Our goal is to help you return to your highest level of function while minimizing pain and complications. Successful recovery requires teamwork between the surgeon, patient, and rehabilitation team. Following these instructions carefully will help protect your surgery and support optimal healing.

If you have questions at any time during recovery, please contact our office at **(615) 936-7846**.