

# ACL Reconstruction: *Home Instructions*

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## What happens after ACL reconstruction surgery?

There's a lot you can do after ACL reconstruction surgery to make sure you have a good outcome. At first, you can help your wound heal by managing the pain and swelling. You'll also need to start right away with **rehabilitation** exercises. These are exercises to help you regain range of motion in your knee, and to restore your sense of balance and control in your leg.

It takes most patients several months to get back to full strength, balance, and control in the knee and leg. How fast and how well you recover depends in large part on how consistently and carefully you do your rehabilitation exercises.

## How do I care for myself at home?

In the first days after surgery, your leg will be swollen and you will have a thick dressing covering your surgical wounds. Below are a few tips that will help you care for yourself and your incisions.

### Manage pain and swelling

**Take pain medicine as prescribed and ONLY when you need it.** When you leave the hospital, your pain should be under good control. Rest, ice, and elevating your leg are important ways to control your pain. To stay safe when taking pain medicine, do the following:

- Take it as soon as you need it (the less you take the better) — but don't wait for the pain to get too bad.
- DO NOT take any pain medicine that your doctor has not prescribed.
- DO NOT drink alcohol while taking any pain medicine.



### What do I need to do next?

- 1 Manage pain and swelling with rest, ice, and elevation, taking pain medicine only as prescribed and only when needed.
- 2 Help yourself heal by caring for your incision and wearing compression stockings if recommended by your doctor.
- 3 Rest and avoid activity for the first 3 to 7 days after your surgery. Resume activity based on your doctor's recommendations.
- 4 Call your doctor if you have any problems listed on page 2.

**Elevate your leg.** For the first 3 to 7 days, keep your leg elevated above your heart. Lie back and use pillows to prop up your knee.

**Use ice** as directed by your doctor to relieve pain and swelling. Your doctor may recommend a special cold therapy machine.

### Care for your incision

**Keep your dressings clean and dry.** Your doctor will let you know when you can remove your dressings and when it's okay to take a shower without worrying about getting your incisions wet. Do not go swimming, take a bath or soak in a hot tub until your doctor says it's okay.

**Wear your compression stockings** (sometimes called TED hose) as long as your doctor advises. Compression stockings help prevent blood clots.

**Watch for bleeding.** You may have a small amount of bleeding from your surgical incisions, which is normal.

**Watch for signs of infection** at the incision site—increased redness or swelling, pus, or fever over 101° F (38° C)—and report any of these signs to your doctor.

## Activity

**Take it easy for the first 3 to 7 days.** Rest as much as possible after surgery, other than doing your exercises as instructed and getting up to use the bathroom, eat meals, or take medicine.

**Start your recovery exercises as soon as your doctor recommends.** When you start depends on the extent of your injuries, the complexity of your repairs, and your physical condition.

**Avoid activities that cause pain or swelling in the knee.** Examples include climbing stairs or standing or sitting for long periods.

**Use assistive devices as recommended.** After ACL surgery, you may need to use crutches for several weeks and a knee brace for several months until you can walk without limping. Using these devices just as your doctor recommends will help you heal faster.

## Physical therapy

Your doctor may recommend that you work with a physical therapist to help with your rehabilitation activities. A physical therapist can create and supervise a program of specific exercises to increase your flexibility, strength, and balance. Physical therapy also includes a variety of treatments to reduce scar tissue, promote healing, and help prevent future injuries.

## Returning to your normal activities

The recovery period after ACL surgery, and what you can expect long term, is different for every patient. It depends in part on your general physical condition, what you need to do, and other factors.

**Return to work when your doctor advises.** While many patients can return to work within a week, those whose jobs are physically strenuous and cannot get a light duty assignment may need to be off longer.

**Return to sports.** You can return to sports when you have no more pain or swelling, when your knee has full range of motion, and when your muscle strength and endurance are restored to normal. Your doctor needs to give written permission before you return to any sports or competition.



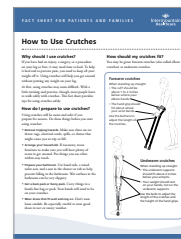
## When should I call my doctor?

Watch for problems, and call your doctor if you experience any of the following:

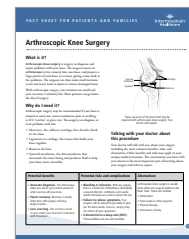
- The knee keeps bleeding (small spots might show on the bandages, but they shouldn't spread).
- Pain that you cannot control.
- Pus or foul-smelling liquid draining from your knee.
- Chills or a fever over 101° F.
- Nausea and vomiting that does not stop.
- The knee continues to swell or feel numb, and elevating your leg or loosening your bandage doesn't help.
- Change of color in your foot or ankle.

## For more information

Ask your doctor for these Intermountain fact sheets:



*How to Use Crutches*



*Arthroscopic Knee Surgery*

Your doctor will schedule an appointment to check your progress. Be sure to write down any questions you have and bring them to this follow-up appointment.



## My follow-up appointment

Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Doctor: \_\_\_\_\_

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