Pain after surgery is normal and having your pain controlled is not the same as being pain free. It is important that you keep moving after surgery and be kind to yourself to allow your body a chance to rest and recover. It is also important to have good pain relief after an operation, not only for comfort, but also to reduce the chance of complications. These include chest infections from being unable to take deep breaths, as well as blood clots in your legs and pressure sores from not being able to move.

Your anaesthetist will have explained the different options for pain relief before your operation and will make sure that you are prescribed the most appropriate post operative drugs, depending on the type of operation you have had, your general health and any other medications which you are already taking.

You may also be given an injection of a numbing medicine (a nerve block) before your operation which can give you pain relief for up to 24 hours after your procedure. Your anaesthetist will explain the details of this before your operation.

Paracetamol

This is a simple pain-relieving medication which comes in many forms such as tablets or liquid and may be administered as an injection while you are still in hospital. Paracetamol works well if taken regularly and usually doesn’t cause many side effects. Please follow the instructions given to you on discharge as paracetamol can be harmful if more than the recommended amount is taken.

Anti-inflammatory medicines

These are the next step of pain relief after paracetamol and include ibuprofen, diclofenac and naproxen. Some people may experience side effects with these medicines, including those over the age of 65, people who have asthma, kidney problems or those on blood thinning medicines. This will be discussed with you before you leave hospital. It is common for these medications to irritate the stomach so please try to take them with food. If you do experience stomach irritation please stop taking them. For most operations, you should be starting to be coming off anti-inflammatory medications by no later than 10 days after your operation. If you are still needing to take them at two weeks after your operation please contact your GP.

Opioids

Occasionally, stronger pain-relieving medicines are needed for a short period of time after your operation if it is likely to make you very sore. These drugs include codeine, tramadol, morphine and oxycodone. They can be given as tablets, liquids or injections. The injection can be given in the form of a PCA (which means patient-controlled analgesia) while in hospital, where you are able to directly administer medicines like morphine into your vein via a drip every 5 minutes or so until you are comfortable. Sometimes you will be given the opioid in a tablet or liquid form to take home with you while you recover.

These medicines can make you feel sick, itchy or sleepy. Most people become constipated to some extent after taking opioid pain-relieving medications, so it is important to drink plenty of water and eat food rich in fibre (if you are allowed to do so) after your operation. The surgical team will advise you if there are any restrictions on what you should eat or drink after your operation. You may also need a laxative (a medicine to help you pass stools more easily) or an anti-sickness tablet.

At home

Once your body is healing and you are starting feel better, you should start to reduce the number of pain -relieving medicines you take, starting with the opioids. This is usually 1-3 days after your operation. Drugs like morphine and oxycodone which are the strongest may be stopped gradually and you should continue to take other regular pain-killers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen (if you are able). If your pain becomes intolerable, restart the opioids and wait a day or two before stopping again. The aim is to make your pain manageable enough for you to be able to restart your usual activities, so you may still have some mild pain. Most people are able to stop opioids after a week at most. **It is important that you do not take other medications that make you sleepy, or drink alcohol, while taking opioids.**

It is important to keep medicines like opioids out of reach of young children to avoid accidental ingestion. They must not be shared with anybody else, even if they already take the same medicine or a similar one. Any left-over medicine should be returned to a pharmacy for safe disposal.

If you are worried about pain, especially if it is becoming worse, you can contact your GP, NHS 111 or the hospital either via the emergency department or by finding the contact details on leaflets you were given on discharge. If you go home on the same day as your procedure the hospital should be your first contact and you will have been advised how to do this before you left hospital.

Obtaining further supplies

Paracetamol and ibuprofen can be bought without a prescription from pharmacies and many other shops. If you require more opioid medicines, you should contact your GP. They may wish to speak to you to ensure that you are not experiencing any side effects or complications from your operation.

Long term use

Opioid medicines are safe for short term use, but a small number of people can become dependent on them, even at standard doses. This is why it is important to plan with your doctor how to cut down and stop these medicines after your procedure. All postoperative pain-relieving medicines should be taken for the shortest period of time possible.

Driving

Opioids can affect your driving skills in the same way as alcohol in that they can slow down your reaction times and cognitive skills causing you to be unfit to drive, even if you do not feel impaired. **It is illegal in England and Wales to drive while taking any prescription medicine if it impairs your ability to drive.** However, you may drive if you follow the advice given by healthcare professionals on how to take them, and the drug is not causing you to be unfit to drive.

Further information

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| <https://www.rcoa.ac.uk/documents/anaesthesia-explained/pain-relief> | Qr code  Description automatically generated |
| <https://www.britishpainsociety.org/static/uploads/resources/files/Taster_for_web_Aug_2017.pdf> | Qr code  Description automatically generated |