

Sleep, Pain and Recovery



Sleep, Pain and Recovery

Kieran Hirpara © ⓘ 4.0

What you're feeling

It is very common to have trouble sleeping after shoulder surgery. In fact, 84-97% of patients experience sleep disturbance before the operation. You might find that your sleep quality does not improve much in the first 6 weeks after shoulder arthroplasty (joint replacement). This early period can be frustrating, but it is a normal part of the healing process.

If you had rotator cuff repair, sleep issues are also common. Your sleep quality may actually worsen at 2 weeks after the surgery. Do not be alarmed. The good news is that your sleep will improve beyond your pre-surgery baseline by 6 weeks. You should see further improvement of sleep disturbance at 3 months.

Sleep problems can happen right after total knee arthroplasty (joint replacement) as well. You may experience an initial stage of sleep disturbance immediately after the operation. However, most patients see an overall improvement in sleep quality after the surgery. If you have a history of sleep disorders, you generally do not experience worse sleep patterns during this time compared to others.

For carpal tunnel release, you can expect substantial improvements in how well you sleep. Your subjective feeling of rest will likely get better, and this aligns more closely with standard sleep measures over time.

Pain often flares at night or when you try to sleep on the affected side. Reaching behind your back to fasten a bra or tucking in a shirt may become difficult. These daily tasks can be challenging as you recover. Your doctor will guide you through these limitations. Rest is crucial for your healing.

What's actually happening

You might notice that your sleep does not improve quickly after surgery. This is normal. For shoulder replacement patients, 84-97% already have trouble sleeping before the operation. Your sleep quality shows minimal improvement within the first 6 weeks postoperatively. The pain and stiffness in your shoulder make it hard to find a comfortable position.

If you had rotator cuff repair, the story is slightly different. Sleep disturbance is common after this procedure. Your sleep quality worsens at 2 weeks after rotator cuff repair. This is when pain is often at its peak. However, your body begins to heal. Sleep quality improves beyond baseline by 6 weeks after rotator cuff repair. Full improvement of sleep disturbance after rotator cuff repair occurs at 3 months.

For total knee replacement, the pattern is also distinct. There is an initial stage of sleep disturbance immediately postoperatively after total knee arthroplasty. If you had a history of sleep disorders, you did not report nor objectively experience worse sleep patterns perioperatively after total knee arthroplasty. Overall sleep quality improves after total knee arthroplasty. You may find that environmental disturbances decrease, allowing for more restful nights as you recover.

Your doctor may recommend melatonin postoperatively after arthroscopic rotator cuff repair to reduce sleep disturbance in the early postoperative period. This may help with longer term functional outcome. Other medications like corticosteroids and anticonvulsants provide inconsistent benefits for improving postoperative sleep quality in primary total joint arthroplasty patients.

Sleep is vital for your healing. Good sleep helps prevent sports injuries and supports your cognitive skills. By understanding that sleep issues are a common part of the process, you can be patient with your recovery. Your body needs time to reset its rhythm.

What we can do about it

Sleep problems are very common before shoulder surgery, affecting 84-97% of patients. You may notice little change in your sleep quality during the first 6 weeks after the operation. If you have had rotator cuff repair, your sleep might feel worse at 2 weeks. However, it usually improves beyond your pre-surgery level by 6 weeks. Full improvement often takes 3 months.

For knee replacement, you might experience initial sleep disturbance immediately after surgery. Overall quality tends to improve over time. Some patients find that environmental disturbances decrease, leading to better rest in specific areas. If you have a history of sleep disorders, your doctor should know. Research shows these patients do not necessarily experience worse sleep patterns around the time of knee replacement.

Self-management starts with good sleep hygiene. Keep a regular schedule. Limit caffeine and screen time before bed. Gentle physiotherapy can help reduce pain, which often disrupts rest. Give these lifestyle changes time to work. Most patients see steady progress as healing continues.

Medical management focuses on pain control, since pain is a major cause of poor sleep. Your doctor may prescribe anti-inflammatories or other pain medications. For knee replacement patients, dexamethasone is sometimes used to reduce pain and enhance sleep quality. Higher doses show the most pronounced effects in the first 48 hours. Melatonin is recommended after arthroscopic rotator cuff repair to help with early sleep disturbance. It may also support longer-term functional outcomes.

Be aware that other medications like corticosteroids and anticonvulsants provide inconsistent benefits for sleep after joint replacement. Esketamine, used in patient-controlled pain pumps, can safely prevent sleep

disturbance and improve recovery in elderly patients having hip or knee surgery. It also helps relieve anxiety and depression. Always discuss these options with your care team to weigh benefits against risks.

If sleep problems remain severe despite these steps, seek specialist input. Persistent issues may require further assessment. In some specific cases, a procedure might be considered, but this is rare. Your doctor will guide you on the next best steps based on your individual recovery.

When to see someone

See your GP if pain persists despite rest, or if you feel weakness, instability, or locking in the joint. Ask for a specialist review if symptoms interfere with your sleep or work. Sudden worsening of pain also warrants immediate attention. Be aware that sleep disturbance is common after procedures like rotator cuff repair or shoulder replacement. Sleep quality may worsen at 2 weeks but typically improves beyond baseline by 6 weeks. For knee replacements, initial sleep issues are normal, with overall improvement following. If you have obstructive sleep apnea, monitor for short-term medical complications after shoulder surgery. Long-term outcomes remain stable.