



DOCKERY & ASSOCIATES
PHYSICAL THERAPY

Plan Your Recovery Before Surgery

A Post-Operative Guide



Welcome

If you have an upcoming orthopedic surgery, one of the smartest things you can do is plan your recovery **before** your procedure.

At **Dockery & Associates Physical Therapy**, we help patients prepare for surgery, know what to expect afterward, and begin rehabilitation with a clear plan already in place. This guide was created to help you understand the early stages of orthopedic surgery recovery and show you how to set yourself up for success.

Important: This guide is for general educational purposes only and does not replace your surgeon's instructions. Always follow your surgeon's specific post-operative precautions, medication instructions, weight-bearing restrictions, brace or sling guidelines, and activity restrictions. If anything in this guide conflicts with your surgeon's orders, follow your surgeon's orders.

Procedures This Guide Commonly Applies To

This guide is often helpful for patients recovering from:

- Rotator cuff repair
- Shoulder labral or instability surgery
- ACL reconstruction
- Meniscus surgery
- Total knee replacement
- Ankle surgery
- Achilles repair
- Elbow surgery
- Wrist surgery
- Hand surgery
- Other orthopedic procedures

Questions to Ask Before Surgery

Before your procedure, it is helpful to ask your surgeon or care team:

- Do I have any weight-bearing restrictions?
- Will I need a brace, sling, crutches, or walker?
- What movements should I avoid at first?
- What amount of pain and swelling is normal?
- When should I start physical therapy?
- How long will I need to go to physical therapy?
- What should I do if I have questions after surgery?

Knowing these answers ahead of time can make the first few weeks much smoother.

Recover with confidence. Plan ahead.

One of the best things you can do before surgery is get your physical therapy scheduled ahead of time. Most patients wait until after surgery to think about physical therapy. That often creates unnecessary stress at the exact time they should be focused on healing.

Scheduling your physical therapy **before surgery** can help you:

- Know where you are going after your procedure
- Understand what to expect during the first phase of recovery

- Reduce uncertainty and stress
- Begin rehab at the right time
- Have your evaluation and follow-up visits already reserved
- **Avoid scrambling for appointment availability after surgery**

Many patients feel more confident when their therapy plan is already in place before surgery even happens.

Important Note: You are not required to perform physical therapy at the same place you have your surgery. Patients have the option to choose the clinic that works best for them. If you want one-on-one care, expert level rehab, convenient scheduling, and a plan already in place before surgery, Dockery & Associates Physical Therapy is here to help. Let your surgeon or nurse know that you want to schedule with our team and they will either fax the referral to our office or hand you a physical copy to take to the location of your choice.



What to Expect in the First 72 Hours After Surgery

The first few days after surgery are usually the most uncomfortable. It is normal to experience:

- Pain and soreness around the surgical area
- Swelling
- Bruising
- Stiffness
- Fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping comfortably
- Limited mobility and function

These early symptoms are common, but they should gradually improve as healing progresses.

Your early priorities should be:

1. Protect the surgical area

Follow all precautions exactly as instructed.

2. Manage pain and swelling

Use medication, icing, elevation, and rest as recommended.

3. Begin safe movement when cleared

Appropriate movement at the right time can help reduce stiffness and support recovery.

4. Avoid doing too much too soon

A common mistake is feeling a little better and then overdoing activity before the tissues are ready.

Pain and Swelling: What Helps Most?

Pain and swelling are expected after surgery, but there are several things that often help.

Helpful strategies:

- Ice the surgical area for 15–20 minutes at a time every 2 hours, especially during the first 48–72 hours after surgery. Always place a towel or cloth between the ice pack and your skin or dressing. Elevate the area when possible to help reduce swelling. Follow your surgeon's instructions if they gave you a specific icing schedule.
- Take medications exactly as prescribed
- Change positions regularly rather than staying in one position too long
- Perform approved home exercises consistently
- Avoid unnecessary overuse or prolonged activity

Swelling and soreness usually improve gradually, not instantly. Recovery is often a steady process rather than a perfect straight line.



Wound Care

Proper wound care prevents infection and promotes healing. Be diligent in following your surgeon's specific wound care instructions.

- **Handwashing:** Wash your hands thoroughly before and after caring for your wound.
- **Dressing Changes:** Always follow your surgeon's instructions for dressing changes.
 - For smaller incisions, it is common for the bulky outer dressing to come off around 48 hrs with smaller bandages or Band-Aids applied afterwards.
 - Some larger incisions, such as from an open procedure, may require the dressing to stay on for 5 days or even up until the first post-op visit with your surgeon.
- **Keep it Dry:** Begin showering once allowed by surgeon. He/she will let you know when you are allowed to get incisions wet. Ensure the incision site is dry after showering by patting dry with a clean towel. Do not submerge under water or soak until incision is fully closed and healed.

Always watch for signs of infection, such as increased redness, abnormal swelling, or excessive drainage, and report these to your healthcare provider promptly.

Red Flags: When You Should Contact Your Surgeon Promptly

Call your surgeon or seek medical attention if you notice:

- Fever or chills of temperature $\geq 100.4^{\circ}\text{F}$
- Excessive redness or drainage from the incision
- Severe swelling that is rapidly worsening
- Pain that is becoming significantly worse instead of gradually improving
- Calf pain, calf swelling, or tenderness
- Chest pain or shortness of breath
- New or worsening numbness
- Sudden loss of movement or function
- Uncontrolled pain

When in doubt, contact your surgeon's office.

How to Prepare Your Home for Recovery

A little preparation before surgery can make a big difference afterward.

Helpful ways to prepare your home:

- Keep frequently used items within easy reach
- Prepare meals ahead of time if possible

- Set up a comfortable resting area
- Remove loose rugs and other tripping hazards
- Use supportive pillows for positioning
- Keep medications, water, and ice packs nearby
- Wear easy-to-put-on clothing and shoes
- Plan transportation if you will be unable to drive initially

Sleep Tips After Surgery

Sleep can be difficult after surgery, especially during the first few days.

These strategies may help:

- Use pillows to support the surgical area
- For shoulder surgery, using a recliner for the first couple of days can be helpful
 - Use pillow or towel roll behind surgical arm for support (you should be able to see elbow)
- Use a wedge to either sleep on incline or to elevate legs in bed
- Follow your surgeon's recommended sleeping position
- Ice before bed if approved
- Avoid staying in one position too long during the day
- Perform your approved mobility routine earlier in the evening
- Try to keep a consistent sleep schedule



Common Mistakes That Slow Recovery

Many post-operative setbacks happen not because something went wrong with the surgery, but because the recovery process was not managed properly.

Common mistakes include:

Doing too much on a good day

Feeling better for a few hours does not necessarily mean the tissues are ready for more activity.

Skipping movement because of soreness

Some soreness is expected. Completely avoiding movement can increase stiffness and slow progress.

Pushing through sharp pain

There is a difference between expected discomfort and pain that signals irritation.

Ignoring swelling

Persistent swelling can limit motion, increase discomfort, and interfere with progress.

Waiting too long to start therapy

For many procedures, physical therapy at the right time helps improve mobility, strength, confidence, and function.

What Physical Therapy Helps With After Surgery

Post-operative physical therapy is about much more than exercise.

A well-designed rehab plan can help you:

- Reduce pain and swelling
- Restore range of motion safely
- Improve walking, reaching, lifting, and everyday movement
- Rebuild strength gradually
- Improve balance, coordination, and confidence
- Reduce compensations that can create other problems
- Return to work, hobbies, sports, and normal daily life more safely

Good rehabilitation should be based on:

- Your exact surgery
- Your surgeon's protocol
- Tissue healing timelines
- Your current pain and mobility
- Your goals and daily demands

A General Recovery Timeline

Every surgery is different, but many recoveries follow a similar progression.

Early Protection and Healing

Goal: Protect the repair, control pain and swelling, begin safe movement

Restoration of Motion and Basic Function

Goal: Improve mobility, decrease stiffness, normalize daily movement

Rebuild Strength and Endurance

Goal: Increase strength, stability, coordination, and functional movement

Return to Higher-Level Activity

Goal: Gradual return to work tasks, sport, exercise, and higher-level activity



What Recovery Success Really Looks Like

Successful recovery does not always feel perfectly smooth. It is common to have:

- Good days and slower days
- Temporary soreness after increased activity
- Frustration during certain phases
- Periods when progress feels slower than expected

That does not mean you are failing.

In most cases, successful recovery comes from:

- Following the right precautions
- Staying consistent with the plan
- Progressing gradually

- Getting expert guidance when needed

Why Patients Choose Dockery & Associates Physical Therapy

At **Dockery & Associates Physical Therapy**, we help post-operative patients recover with individualized care focused on safe progression and meaningful results.

What makes our approach different:

- One-on-one care with a PT and/or OT throughout your entire Plan of Care
- Consistent treatment with the same clinician whenever possible so maximum progress can be made in the most efficient manner
- Weekend appointments available for individuals who have difficulty attending their sessions throughout the week
- Hands-on, individualized progression based on your surgery and goals
- Close attention to pain, swelling, motion, strength, and return-to-function milestones
- Clear communication and patient education throughout recovery

Whether you are recovering from shoulder surgery, ACL reconstruction, knee replacement, meniscus surgery, ankle surgery, elbow surgery, wrist surgery, hand surgery, or another orthopedic procedure, our goal is to make sure you recover with confidence and reach all of your personal goals.

Call Dockery & Associates Physical Therapy before your surgery to schedule your post-operative evaluation and follow-up visits in advance so your recovery plan is already in place when you need it the most!

Dockery & Associates PT – Central Madison

(256) 285-4352
401 Hughes Rd, Ste 2
Madison, AL 35758

Dockery & Associates PT – West Madison

(256) 622-5410
814 Palmer Rd, Ste D
Madison, AL 35758

Website: www.dockerypt.com



Scan QR Code to Request an Appointment!