HOME EXERCISE PROGRAM

After Knee Surgery: Home Exercises

William McLaughlin, MD | Sports Medicine Surgery | Advanced Bone & Joint

Early home exercises for the first 2 weeks after knee surgery. Your surgeon will tell you how much weight to put on the leg, whether to wear a brace, and how far you may bend. Always follow the specific instructions of your surgeon and physical therapist, which take priority over this handout.

General Principles

TOP PRIORITIES

- Get the knee **fully straight** — this is the most important early goal.
- Wake up the thigh muscle (quadriceps).
- Control swelling and pain.

- **Frequency.** Do the exercises 3 times per day, about 10 repetitions each, unless told otherwise.
- **Pain.** Mild discomfort is expected. Stop and rest if pain becomes sharp or severe.
- **Ice and elevation.** Ice 15–20 minutes after each session and several times a day. Elevate with the **heel** supported — never with a pillow under the knee.
- **Weight on the leg.** Use crutches and put only as much weight on the leg as your surgeon has allowed.
- **Brace.** If you were given a brace, wear it as instructed, including while sleeping if told to. You may remove it for exercises unless told otherwise; keep it on for straight-leg raises.
- **Bending limit.** If your surgeon gave you a bending limit, do not go past it with any exercise.
- **No** running, jumping, squatting, or sports until cleared by Dr. McLaughlin.

WHAT THE WEIGHT-BEARING TERMS MEAN

- **No weight (NWB):** the foot does not touch the floor. All weight goes through crutches and the other leg.
- **Toe-touch:** the toes may rest on the floor for balance only — no real weight through the leg.
- **Weight as tolerated:** put as much weight on the leg as is comfortable, using crutches until walking is normal.

Home Exercises | Days 1–14

GOALS FOR THIS PHASE

- Full straightening of the knee.
- Bend the knee as allowed.
- Tighten the quadriceps well enough to lift the leg without the knee sagging.

Exercises

1. **Ankle pumps** — Lying down, point the toes up and down. About 20 times every hour while awake, to help circulation and prevent blood clots.
2. **Quad sets** — Leg straight, tighten the thigh to press the back of the knee down. Hold 5 seconds. 10 reps.
3. **Heel props** — Rest the heel on a rolled towel or pillow with nothing under the knee; let the knee sag straight. 10 minutes, 3–4 times per day.
4. **Straight-leg raise** — Tighten the thigh, then lift the straight leg about 12 inches, hold 3–5 seconds, lower slowly. 10 reps. Wear your brace locked straight if you have one. If the knee bends as you lift, keep doing quad sets until it doesn't.
5. **Heel slides** — Lying down, slide the heel toward the buttock to bend the knee, then straighten. 10 reps. **Do not pass your bending limit.**
6. **Kneecap mobilization** — With the leg relaxed and straight, gently glide the kneecap up and down, then side to side. 1–2 minutes.
7. **Gluteal sets** — Squeeze the buttocks together, hold 5 seconds. 10 reps.
8. **Side-lying leg raise** — Lying on the non-operated side, knee straight (brace on if you have one), lift the operated leg toward the ceiling, then lower slowly. 10 reps.

WHEN TO CALL YOUR SURGEON

- Fever over 101°F, chills, or increasing redness, warmth, or drainage from the incisions.
- Calf pain, swelling, or tenderness — possible blood clot.
- **Sudden shortness of breath or chest pain — call 911.**
- Pain or swelling that is severe or getting worse despite ice, elevation, and medication.
- Loss of the ability to straighten the knee, or a knee that is getting stiffer.

This protocol is a general guideline. Progression is patient-specific and at the discretion of William McLaughlin, MD.