

# Driving after upper-limb surgery



Driving after upper-limb surgery: returning to the wheel safely depends on which limb was operated on, how comfortably you can grip and steer, and whether you are still using strong pain medication.

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Driving after upper-limb surgery is both a medical and a legal question. The short answer: you can drive again when you can safely control the vehicle in all foreseeable situations, including an emergency stop with both hands on the wheel – and your surgeon and treating clinicians agree.

## The legal position

Under the Austroads *Assessing Fitness to Drive* guidelines used across Australia, the driver is responsible for being fit to drive at all times. Insurers may refuse a claim if you were driving against medical advice.

If you are still in a sling, splint, or cast, do not drive. If you cannot hold the steering wheel firmly with both hands or operate the gear-stick or indicators, do not drive.

## Typical timelines

These are general guides – your surgeon will give you a specific date.

Operation	Earliest typical return
Carpal tunnel release	1–2 weeks (when the wound is comfortable)
Trigger finger release	1–2 weeks
Wrist ganglion excision	2–3 weeks
Elbow nerve release	2–3 weeks
Distal biceps repair	6 weeks (when out of the brace)
Rotator cuff repair	6 weeks (out of sling, with surgeon sign-off)

Operation	Earliest typical return
Shoulder replacement	6 weeks
Wrist or finger fusion	6–8 weeks (until cast/splint comes off)
Latarjet / shoulder stabilisation	6 weeks

## Practical test

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Before you drive on the road, sit in a stationary car and try:

- Both hands on the wheel for 5 minutes without your arm tiring
- Turning the wheel fully both ways
- Reaching across to the gear-stick and indicators
- Pretending to perform an emergency stop

If anything is awkward or painful, you are not ready.

## Insurance

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Tell your insurer if your doctor has told you not to drive and you choose to drive anyway – your cover may not apply. If you are unsure, ask your insurer in writing.

## Long drives

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Take more breaks than usual for the first month back. Stiffness and fatigue build up faster than you expect.