

Preventing Blood Clots After Surgery

Ankle exercises and compression to lower the risk of blood clots after surgery.

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Blood clots in the leg veins (deep vein thrombosis, or DVT) are most often discussed after hip and knee surgery. The risk after upper-limb surgery is much lower, but not zero – being in a sling and moving less than usual is enough to nudge it up. A few simple habits at home keep that risk where it should be.

Why upper-limb surgery still carries some risk

After shoulder or elbow surgery you are often less mobile for the first week or two. You may sleep upright in a chair, walk less, and avoid long outings. Sitting still slows the blood flow in your leg veins, and that is the main thing that makes a clot more likely.

A few things raise the baseline risk further: a previous DVT or pulmonary embolism, a strong family history of clots, the combined oral contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy, recent long-haul travel, smoking, obesity, and some medical conditions including cancer and inflammatory bowel disease. If any of these apply to you, your surgeon may have specifically recommended blood-thinning tablets or injections – follow that advice exactly.

What you can do every day

Most patients do not need blood-thinning medication after upper-limb surgery. The protective habits below are usually enough:

- **Keep walking.** Five short walks around the house are better than one long one. Aim for movement every hour you are awake, even if it's just to the kettle.
- **Move your ankles often.** While sitting, point your toes up and down twenty times every hour. This pumps blood out of the calf veins.
- **Drink water.** Two litres a day. Dehydration thickens the blood; pain medications and reduced appetite both push you towards drinking less than usual.
- **Don't sit cross-legged for long periods,** and don't sit in a recliner with strong pressure under the knees.

- **Avoid long-haul flights** for at least two weeks after major surgery if you can. If you must fly, walk the aisle every hour and wear compression stockings.

Smoking dramatically raises clot risk; if you have stopped for the operation, this is a great window to keep going.

Warning signs – call us or go to the emergency department

- **One calf becomes painful, swollen, warm, or red** compared to the other side
- **Sudden shortness of breath, chest pain, or coughing up blood** – go straight to the emergency department, this can be a clot in the lung (pulmonary embolism)
- **Dizziness or fainting** with any of the above

Don't wait for your follow-up appointment if any of these happen. Treated early, blood clots are very manageable; left late, they can become dangerous.