

Why Does the Second Side Hurt More?

8 out of 10 people find the second hip or knee replacement surgery harder than the first, often reporting more pain—even when the procedure is performed in exactly the same way.

Why?

There are many reasons why patients experience this, but here are the two main ones:

1. The Perception of Pain

Humans are hardwired to forget the pain of difficult experiences as a survival mechanism. For example, if women remembered the full pain of labor and delivery, our species might not have survived. We remember pain in general, but not its actual magnitude. Our memories are designed to fail us in this way so we can move forward without being paralyzed by fear.

So, when people say the second surgery is more painful, it might feel true—but it's not necessarily true.

2. The Actual Pain

In many cases, patients do experience more pain after the second surgery. Why?

Assuming the procedure was identical, the main reason is your activity level. After the first surgery, patients are usually tentative and cautious. But after a successful first surgery, they tend to be more confident and active sooner after the second surgery—often without realizing it.

For example, one patient had two knee replacements six months apart. At her 6-week follow-up after the second surgery, she was doing well but puzzled by the increased pain. She realized she had returned to work just 2 weeks after the second surgery, compared to 10 weeks after the first. That earlier return to activity explained the increased soreness.

She hadn't linked the activity with the pain, but they were connected. And that's not a bad thing—it's actually a good thing. She recovered well and earned two extra months of pay.

You're more likely to be active after your second surgery, and that can lead to more pain. But it's better to walk the dog and be a little sore than to sit inside and avoid activity.

A Simpler Idea

Think of it like pregnancy: all pregnancies start the same, but they're rarely the same—even for the same person. Surgeries are similar. Even if the procedure is the same, your body's response can vary each time.

