
Understanding Leg Amputation: Surgery for a Medical Condition

You've been told by a healthcare provider that you need to have a leg amputation. This surgery removes part or all your leg. It's done because tissue in the leg is diseased and can't be healed. Or it may be needed to prevent the disease from spreading farther into your body. The goal of the surgery is to restore your ability to function. This is because removing the diseased part of your leg can improve your total health.

Why amputation is needed

Your healthcare provider and team will work with you to set up a treatment plan. Take an active role in your care and ask questions. An amputation is usually done only after healthcare providers have tried to treat the problem in other ways. They have determined that your body can't heal the tissue damage in your leg. The tissue may be badly infected or even dead. The most common causes of tissue damage include:

- Foot ulcers (sores) due to diabetes
- Reduced blood flow caused by peripheral vascular disease (PVD)
- Tumors due to cancer
- Severe infection resulting from wounds
- Severe trauma

About the surgery

The surgeon will save as much of your limb as possible. This may include joints, such as the knee. But you may not know before the surgery how much of the leg will remain. Sometimes, another surgery is needed later to remove more of the leg. This is done to preserve your health and improve healing.

Questions to ask

Ask your healthcare team about anything that isn't clear to you. Example of questions to ask:

- How will my pain be managed?
- How soon will I be able to stand after surgery?
- Will I get a prosthesis?
- Where can I find support after my amputation?
- When will I start therapy after surgery?

After the surgery

Pain management

Your pain will be monitored at all stages of your recovery. Talk to your care team about options for medicine and other treatments to help manage your pain. When you wake up right after surgery, you'll be on pain medicine to help keep you comfortable.

Rehabilitation

You will have a rehab team that may include doctors, therapists, prosthetists, surgeons, nurses, and others involved in your care. You are the most important member of this team.

Right after surgery, you'll have a splint or other form of dressing on your leg. This helps control swelling and aid healing. You may start rehab, including physical therapy (PT), soon after surgery, depending on your health. The goal of rehab is to help you reach your best level of health and quality of life and to support your independence in walking and daily activities. PT strengthens your muscles and helps to prevent muscle or joint tightening. You'll also learn how to safely transfer between your bed and other surfaces, such as a chair. This helps prevent falls and protects your wound while it heals. When you're ready, you may be able to move around using a walker or crutches. And when your wound has healed, you may get an artificial limb. But you may need to wait some time until the swelling in your leg goes down so the prosthetic fits well.

Living with limb loss

Losing a limb is life-changing. It's normal to feel upset, sad, scared, angry, or even relieved after surgery. You'll likely have a lot of questions or concerns about your future. You may wish to talk to an expert on emotional changes, such as a psychologist. Consider talking to others who have had an amputation, such as in a peer support group. Keep in mind that the goal of this surgery is to restore function and support your independence. This is so your health can improve and you can live your life more fully. See below for where you can find extra support.

Long-term concerns

Health problems that led to amputation can still affect your intact (natural) leg. Work closely with your healthcare team to manage your overall health. Stay as active as you can. But keep a close watch on your intact foot and leg. Look carefully for wounds that don't heal or areas that change color or lose feeling. Take all medicines as directed by your healthcare provider. This can help keep you from having to go through another surgery.

Notes for family and friends

When someone you care about has an amputation, it may come as a shock. You may wonder if your loved one will be able to care for themselves. You may not know how to react to the changes to their body. These are normal concerns. It will take time for the whole family to adjust. Keep in mind that limb loss does not change who a person is. Right now, your loved one will need your complete support. Take an active role in their care. Help to collect and remember information, such as medicines and healthcare provider's appointments. Most important, your family member or friend needs your understanding and patience. Don't forget to listen. Let them tell you what kind of support is needed. To learn more about adjusting to limb loss, see below.

To learn more

To learn more about limb loss and to get support, contact:

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- [Amputee Coalition of America at www.amputee-coalition.org](http://www.amputee-coalition.org)