

Patient Controlled Analgesia

"I was what they call bone on bone. And because I've always had one hip higher than the other, the thought was that I completely wore out the joint compensating."-Mary Jo, Patient

Mary Jo Wright's got a new knee and new energy to go with it after recovering from her recent surgery. While she's not big on taking a lot of medications, she found the intense pain of total knee replacement was not something she could handle alone.

"They put in a pain block at the joint site that lasts for quite a long time. In addition, pain medication was put in an IV for a period of time, and I requested anti-nausea medication because I became very sick with anesthesia."
-Mary Jo, Patient

IV pain medication in the hospital following surgery is often delivered directly into a vein in your arm or back through a patient-controlled analgesia pump, or PCA. This pump allows you to press a button when your pain gets too intense.

Then, in most cases, this computerized machine supplies an opioid, such as morphine, fentanyl, or hydromorphone to help control your pain.

"There are narcotics and opioids which are fantastic at that intense, acute, post-operative pain."-Dr. Julie Freed, Anesthesiologist

"What they're very good at is that kind of throbbing pain that can last for hours or days."-Matthew Hearing, PhD, Assistant Professor, Biomedical Science

Even though the pump is delivering opioid pain medication, which can be addicting, there's no chance of taking more than you should. Your health care provider will program the pump, to limit the dose of the pain-relieving medication available to you; the pump will not give you the medication if it is not time.

Remember, the purpose of the PCA pump is to give you control over managing your pain. No one else should press the button on the pump.

Now, there can be side effects with the medication provided by the pump. These might include extreme tiredness or low blood pressure, trouble breathing, nausea, confusion, itching or hives, or constipation.

You may also find that the medication from the pump is just not working to handle your pain. For that, former patient Mary Jo has some great advice.

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"It's very important to let your nursing staff know where you're at."-Mary Jo, Patient

On the plus side, there are benefits to using a PCA pump:

People who use the pumps often use less pain medication and find themselves less tired. If you're less tired, you tend to move around more, which can help prevent blood clots after surgery. Also, you should be able to relax and be less anxious, knowing by controlling your pain you're helping the healing process.

As your body heals, your healthcare provider will remove the PCA pump, usually after a day or two. You may still need an oral pain medication to continue the healing process, but the pump will have done its job helping you on that path to recovery.