

POST-SURGICAL RECOVERY GUIDE · 07

Lymphatic drainage after knee or hip replacement

The new joint is in. Physio is going well... mostly.

But the leg still feels puffy, heavy and stiff, especially by evening. Sock lines. Tight skin. A knee that won't quite bend.

Let's look at where lymphatic work fits, and where it doesn't.

01

What's happening in your body

Joint replacement is major surgery on a limb that relies on movement to pump fluid home. Post-surgical swelling comes from several things at once: the normal inflammatory response, disrupted lymph vessels, extensive tissue work, and simply moving less while you recover.

What's typical:

- Swelling usually peaks 2–3 days after surgery
- Most surgical swelling improves within 2–3 weeks
- After major surgery, mild swelling can last 3–6 months
- After knee surgery, swelling that isn't starting to improve within 7–10 days, or suddenly gets worse, should be checked by your doctor

02

An honest word on the research

We believe in being straight with you. Studies on lymphatic drainage in the first week after knee replacement are mixed. Several trials found it eased pain but didn't measurably speed up early swelling compared with standard rehab. A 2023 meta-analysis concluded the high-quality evidence doesn't yet support MLD as routine early care after knee replacement.

Where lymphatic work shines is a little later, and for specific people:

- Swelling hanging on well past the expected recovery window
- Legs already prone to swelling (varicose veins, lipedema, lymphedema, past leg surgery or cancer treatment)
- Firm, hard tissue around the scar or down the shin
- Swelling that's slowing your physio because it hurts to bend

For these, the lymphedema toolkit (MLD, compression, scar work and home exercise) can make a real difference, once any bleeding has fully settled.

03

Your recovery timeline

WHEN	WHAT'S TYPICAL	HOW WE SUPPORT YOU
Days 1–3	Swelling peaks, ice and elevation, walking with aid	Hospital and physio care
Weeks 1–3	Swelling improving week by week, physio building	Physio is the priority. Call us if swelling isn't improving.
Weeks 4–8	Evening swelling, tight skin, stiffness	Lymphatic assessment and sessions if swelling lingers
Months 3–6	Mild swelling can still be normal	Compression, scar work, home routine
6+ months	Ongoing swelling is worth investigating	Lymphedema assessment

04

Working with your physio, not instead of it

Physiotherapy and your home exercises are the main event. Your calf and thigh muscles are also your best lymph pump, so every rep helps.

We fit around that plan: easing swelling so movement feels easier, and teaching you self-drainage, elevation and compression habits for home.

05

Your Renu joint replacement plan

When to start: only with your surgeon's clearance, once your incision has closed and any clot concern has been ruled out. Many people come to us 4–6 weeks or more after surgery, when swelling is lingering.

How many sessions? Often 4–8, tapering as you learn your home routine. People with pre-existing leg swelling may need longer-term support.

Every session includes a swelling and tissue check, lymphatic drainage from the core outward, scar mobility work once healed, and compression and home-care guidance.

06

What a session feels like

You'll lie comfortably with the leg supported. We start at the neck, belly and groin to clear the way, then work down the thigh and around the knee or hip with light, slow strokes. No deep pressure on the joint or incision.

07

What we will never do

- Treat if a blood clot hasn't been ruled out
- Work on an unhealed incision
- Use deep pressure on the joint
- Replace the rehab plan your surgeon and physio have set

08

At home between sessions

What helps most:

- ☐ Ice in 15–20 minute sessions, wrapped, never on the incision. Most useful in the first 72 hours, then as your team directs.
- ☐ Elevate the leg above heart level for about 30 minutes, several times a day
- ☐ Wear compression stockings if prescribed. Snug, never painful.
- ☐ Walk as your surgeon allows. Walking activates the muscle pump.
- ☐ Do your physio exercises daily (they're lymph exercises too)

WHEN TO GET MEDICAL HELP

Call your doctor right away if...

- Calf pain, warmth or swelling in one leg, or swelling spreading below the knee into the calf (possible blood clot)
- Sudden shortness of breath or chest pain (call 911)
- Fever over 38°C, spreading redness or drainage from the incision
- Swelling that suddenly gets much worse, or you can't bear weight

10 · QUESTIONS

Your questions, answered

Does lymphatic drainage help after knee replacement?

It can ease pain and help with swelling that lingers, especially in people prone to leg swelling. Early-recovery research is mixed, so we see it as a support to physio, not a replacement.

Is lymphatic massage safe after hip replacement?

Yes, with your surgeon's clearance and once a blood clot has been ruled out. The touch is light and stays away from the incision.

How long does swelling last after knee replacement?

Most improves over the first few weeks, but mild swelling can last 3–6 months after major surgery.

When should I worry about swelling after knee surgery?

If it isn't starting to improve within 7–10 days, suddenly worsens, spreads into the calf, or comes with heat, redness or fever. Call your doctor.

Can I get lymphatic drainage before my joint replacement?

For people with existing leg swelling, a few sessions before surgery can help get the leg in its best shape. Ask your surgeon.

Should I use heat or ice for swelling after knee replacement?

Ice is usually recommended early on, as your team directs. Avoid heat on a swollen, healing joint unless your physio advises it.

WHY RENU

Not all "lymphatic massage" is the same.

After surgery, you're trusting someone with healing tissue. Here's what you get at Renu.

Led by a Certified Lymphedema Therapist with 10 years' experience. Our post-op and lymphedema program is led by Meeghan Mackenzie, RMT since 2005 and a Certified Lymphedema Therapist since 2016. Meeghan earned her CLT through the Academy of Lymphatic Studies' 135-hour Complete Lymphedema Certification, which covers Manual Lymph Drainage and Complete Decongestive Therapy, the same standard used to treat lymphedema after cancer. She is one of roughly 350 CLTs in Canada.

Trained in the world's leading lymphatic methods. Beyond her CLT, Meeghan has trained in:

- Vodder Manual Lymph Drainage, the original method developed by Dr. Emil Vodder and the foundation of lymphatic therapy worldwide
- Földi, the German school behind Complete Decongestive Therapy, named for the Földi Clinic in the Black Forest, one of Europe's leading lymphology centres
- Chikly Lymph Drainage Therapy, which teaches therapists to feel the rhythm, direction and depth of lymph flow, map pathways by hand, and work with scar tissue and fibrosis

That combination lets us choose the right approach for your body and your surgery, not a one-size-fits-all routine.

Over 20 years of hands-on experience, with a clinical focus on oncology, lymphedema and surgical recovery.

Registered Massage Therapy receipts for your extended health plan.

Honest care. We tell you what lymphatic work can do, what it can't, and when you need your surgeon instead.

What to look for in any post-op therapist:

- A regulated health licence (in Alberta, an RMT, physiotherapist, OT or nurse)
- Formal lymphatic or lymphedema certification, not a weekend course
- Light, comfortable technique. If it hurts, it isn't lymphatic drainage
- No pushing fluid out of incisions
- Clear, published pricing, and willingness to work with your surgeon

FOR YOU TO KEEP

My recovery notes

Bring this page to your sessions. It helps us plan your care around your surgeon's instructions.

PROCEDURE

SURGERY DATE

SURGEON AND CLINIC PHONE

CLEARED FOR LYMPHATIC DRAINAGE ON

COMPRESSION INSTRUCTIONS

SESSION DATE	HOW I'M FEELING · NOTES



GIVE FRESH LIFE OR STRENGTH TO.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Knee or hip still swollen after surgery?

Let's find out what's going on. Book a lymphatic assessment at renu.janeapp.com or call 403-270-2111, and bring your surgeon's clearance if you have it.

BOOK ONLINE

renu.janeapp.com

CALL

403-270-2111

VISIT

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HOURS

Monday to Friday 8:00 am to 8:30 pm
Saturday and Sunday 10:00 am to 5:00 pm

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This guide is general education to support your recovery. It doesn't replace the advice of your surgeon or medical team. Always follow your surgeon's instructions, and seek medical care for any of the warning signs listed in this guide.

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