

Post-Surgical Rehabilitation

What to Expect After Foot and Ankle Surgery — Timelines, Loading and Recovery

Surgery on the foot or ankle is followed by a structured recovery process. Understanding the stages — what is happening in your tissue, when you can load, and when to progress — helps you recover with confidence and reduces the risk of setbacks. This resource covers the most common foot and ankle surgical presentations and general rehabilitation principles. Always follow the specific guidance from your surgeon and rehabilitation team, as timelines vary by procedure, fixation type, and individual healing.

1 Why Recovery Takes Time After Surgery

Healing Stage	Approx. Timeline	What Is Happening	What This Means for You
Inflammatory phase	Days 1–7	Increased blood flow, swelling, and early tissue repair signals. Pain and heat are normal.	Rest and elevation are protective. Excessive early loading can disrupt early repair.
Proliferative phase	Weeks 2–6	New collagen fibres laid down — initially weak and disorganised. Wound closes. Bone healing begins where relevant.	Gradual, controlled movement may begin. Tissue is healing but not yet strong.
Remodelling phase	6 weeks – 12+ months	Collagen matures and aligns along lines of stress. Bone consolidates. Strength returns progressively.	Progressive loading is essential during this phase — but too much too soon causes re-injury. Guided rehab is critical.

2 Common Procedures: What to Expect

Procedure	Non-Weight Bearing	Return to Normal Footwear	Return to Sport / Running
Hallux valgus correction (osteotomy)	2–6 weeks (varies by fixation)	8–12 weeks	4–6 months
Hallux rigidus (cheilectomy / fusion)	Cheilectomy: partial WB early. Fusion: 6–8 weeks NWB	10–14 weeks (fusion)	6–12 months (fusion)
Ankle ligament reconstruction (Brostrom)	2–4 weeks in boot	8–10 weeks	4–6 months
Achilles tendon repair	6–8 weeks NWB in equinus cast/boot	12–16 weeks	9–12 months
Plantar fascia release (endoscopic)	Partial WB immediately; crutches 1–2 weeks	4–6 weeks	3–4 months
Metatarsal osteotomy (lesser toes)	2–4 weeks in post-op shoe	6–10 weeks	3–4 months
Ankle fusion (tibiotalar arthrodesis)	6–8 weeks NWB	12–16 weeks	12+ months — modified activity
Subtalar fusion	6–8 weeks NWB	12–16 weeks	12+ months — modified activity

Important

These are general ranges only. Your surgeon will give you specific weight-bearing instructions based on your fixation type, bone quality, and intraoperative findings. Always follow your surgical team's timeline, not a general guide.

3 Managing the Early Stage Well

Area	What Helps	What to Avoid
Swelling	Elevation above heart level when resting; compression as advised; ice (15–20 min on, 40 min off) in first 72 hours	Prolonged standing or dependent positioning; heat in the first 48–72 hours; alcohol (increases swelling)
Pain management	Take prescribed analgesia as directed rather than waiting for pain to peak; rest; elevation	Overloading the surgical site in an attempt to stay active; stopping analgesia too early
Boot / cast care	Wear the boot as instructed even at night if advised; check for pressure areas; keep the wound dry	Removing the boot to 'rest' the foot unless specifically told you can; getting the wound wet
Crutch use	Use crutches correctly — weight through the hands, not the armpits; non-weight bearing means no contact	Partial loading when NWB is instructed; abandoning crutches before cleared to do so
Wound care	Keep dry and covered as instructed; attend wound check appointments; report signs of infection: heat, redness spreading from wound, discharge, fever	Soaking the wound; picking or disturbing dressings; smoking — significantly impairs healing

4 Orthotics After Foot and Ankle Surgery

Many patients benefit from orthotics as part of their recovery after surgery, or to maintain their results long-term. Here is when and how they are typically used:

Procedure	Role of Orthotics in Recovery
Hallux valgus correction	Orthotics can address the underlying pronation or forefoot mechanics that contributed to bunion development. Without mechanical management, recurrence is more likely. Typically prescribed from 8–12 weeks post-op once in normal footwear.
Hallux rigidus (cheilectomy)	A Morton's extension or stiff-soled rocker footwear protects the joint and reduces pain during the remodelling phase. Prescription typically from 6–8 weeks.
Achilles tendon repair	Graduated heel raise reduction is managed through the orthotic as the tendon lengthens during remodelling. Orthotics that control pronation reduce load on the repairing tendon. From 12–16 weeks in normal footwear.
Ankle ligament reconstruction	Orthotics that control subtalar eversion reduce lateral ankle stress and support the reconstructed ligament during remodelling. Return-to-sport orthotics typically prescribed from 10–12 weeks.
Plantar fascia release	Post-operative management of the kinetic chain is essential — the fasciotomy removes a structural support. Arch-supporting orthotics are almost always indicated post-operatively to manage the mechanical void left by the released fascia.
Ankle / subtalar fusion	Fused joints create altered mechanics proximally. Orthotics address the compensatory patterns at the midfoot and forefoot that develop after fusion. Prescription timing guided by surgeon sign-off.

The most important thing to know

Recovery from foot or ankle surgery is measured in months, not weeks. The tissue that was repaired or reconstructed needs time to mature and strengthen. Patience with the process and consistency with your rehabilitation exercises are the two factors most within your control.