The On-Track Check

Knee replacement rehabilitation, phase by phase

Used by Dr. Rob Letizia, PT, DPT, at Spectrum Therapeutics in Wayne, NJ. Reviewed October 2026.

> Your surgeon's instructions always override this sheet. Run the check monthly against the phase you are in, not against someone else's story.

The five phases

When	Phase	What should be happening
Weeks 1–2	Swelling and safety	Wound healing, controlling swelling, getting the quadriceps to switch on, and walking safely with a device. Range is a bonus at this stage, not the target.
Weeks 3–6	The range window opens and closes	The phase that decides the next year. Straightening should be fully restored or close to it, and the bend should be climbing steadily. If it is not, that window is time-limited.
Weeks 6–12	Strength takes over	Walking should be normalising without a device on level ground. The limiting factor shifts from the joint to the muscle.
Months 3–6	Endurance and confidence	Stairs, longer distances, driving, and getting back to activities. Swelling that comes and goes with activity is still normal here.
Months 6–12	Consolidation	Continued strength gains and the last of the stiffness settling. People routinely improve into the second year.

> **The one rule:** Compare yourself to where you were a month ago. A knee that is still changing is a knee that is working, even when it is slower than your neighbour's.

The Am-I-Behind Rule: who to call, and when

Call the surgeon	For anything in the red flags below, for wound problems, and for a range of motion that is stalling at six weeks.
Call the therapist	For stiffness that is still slowly improving, weakness, a limp that won't resolve, and confidence and balance.
At 6 weeks	The one hard checkpoint. Range of motion is the only part of this recovery with a genuine deadline. If yours has stalled, escalate now rather than at your next scheduled appointment.
At 3 months and after	Has anything measurably changed in the last month? Slow progress is normal; no progress across a full month is a reason to be reassessed rather than to try harder.
At any stage	Still limping once pain has settled is a strength and pattern problem. It does not fix itself with more time.

Week by week at a glance

Timeframe	Key milestones	Typical mobility
Days 1–3	Hospital stay, walking with a walker, start PT	Walker, 90° bend goal
Week 1	At home, short walks, ice and elevate, PT 2–3 times a week	Walker
Weeks 2–3	Transition to a cane, full-extension focus, 100°+ bend	Walker → cane
Weeks 4–6	Walk without an assistive device, 110–120° bend, drive again	Unassisted
Months 2–3	Return to work (desk jobs), normal walking pattern, stairs	Full weight-bearing
Months 4–5	With your surgeon's clearance: walking any distance, swimming, cycling, golf, dancing, doubles tennis, moderate hiking. Most have finished formal PT	Active
Month 6	Functional recovery for most: daily activities and recreation without limitation	Near-full function
Months 7–12	Still improving; swelling can still come and go. By a year, minimal to no pain in normal activities	Full function by a year

Complication windows: what to watch and when

- **Blood clot** (highest risk in the first several weeks): new calf pain, tenderness or swelling, especially in one leg. **With shortness of breath or chest pain, call 911**; do not drive yourself.
- **Infection** (any time, especially early): fever, chills, spreading redness, increasing warmth, or wound drainage that is worsening rather than settling. **Same-day call to your surgeon.**
- A fall onto the new knee, or a sudden pop with new instability or inability to bear weight.
- Pain that is escalating rather than gradually easing after the second week. The trend matters more than the level.
- Later on: new pain after a period of doing well, especially with fever or after a dental or other procedure. Late infections exist and are easy to dismiss.

Questions about your recovery? Spectrum Therapeutics offers one-on-one post-surgical rehabilitation: every visit is with Dr. Rob Letizia, PT, DPT. Call **973-689-7123**. New Jersey is a direct-access state, so you can be seen without a physician's referral; any Medicare plan requires a doctor's prescription for physical therapy.

The full week-by-week guide, with its research sources:
https://spectrumtherapynj.com/blogs/news/knee-replacement-recovery-your-complete-month-by-month-timeline
Educational information only, not a substitute for your surgeon's instructions or an individual evaluation.