

Redefining Retirement: Opportunities Abound for Orthopaedic Surgeons

Are you among the 11,000+ orthopaedic surgeons who will reach retirement age in the next seven years? According to [2021 data](#) from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), 11,191 orthopaedic surgeons, or 60% of orthopaedic surgeons in the US, will be over 65 by the year 2031. Of course, reaching retirement age does not mandate retirement, as demonstrated by the nearly one in four ([23.2%](#)) practicing physicians who are already over the age of 65, but it does beg the question of what comes next for this significant segment of the orthopaedic surgeon population.

According to [retirement research](#) from Jackson Physician Search, age is no longer the driving factor in retirement decisions and the traditional process of announcing one's retirement and setting a date to make it official is no longer the norm. In fact, according to the 2023 report, only 12% of physician respondents plan to retire this way. Instead, many orthopaedic surgeons are embracing a more gradual transition out of full-time clinical practice and opting for what is referred to as a "second" or even "third act."

The Rise of the "Second Act"

While some orthopaedic surgeons may plan to retire on a beach and fill their days with golf and good books, many can't imagine leaving the field altogether. For those nearing the traditional retirement age, the decision to fully retire or transition into a different role is a deeply personal one, often shaped by physical capability, professional satisfaction, and fears about losing one's sense of purpose. Instead of taking a full retirement, they are seeking ways to stay engaged while scaling back their clinical responsibilities.

For orthopaedic surgeons, the physical demands of the job can be a significant factor in deciding how and when to scale back. But stepping away from full-time surgery doesn't necessarily mean the end of a professional life in medicine. Many orthopaedic surgeons have found fulfillment in roles that still leverage their clinical expertise while offering more flexibility. Whether through leadership roles, case reviews, speaking engagements, teaching, or locum tenens work, opportunities abound for those who wish to continue to contribute both in and out of the OR. These second acts allow surgeons to continue making meaningful contributions while enjoying a less demanding schedule.

Career Options Beyond Full-Time Surgery

For orthopaedic surgeons who are contemplating their next steps, there are several potential career paths that allow them to remain engaged in their field while scaling back their clinical workload. Here are a few options:

1. Leadership Roles

As an experienced orthopaedic surgeon, transitioning into a leadership role within a healthcare organization can be a natural next step. Leadership positions, whether at a hospital, academic institution, or medical board, allow surgeons to shape the future of the field by driving policy, influencing educational standards, and overseeing healthcare delivery. For those passionate about mentoring younger surgeons, leadership roles in medical education can be particularly rewarding.

In these roles, orthopaedic surgeons can draw on their years of experience to guide decision-making, improve patient care, and contribute to the strategic direction of their organizations. Many hospitals and medical systems actively seek out seasoned surgeons for leadership positions due to their unique blend of clinical knowledge and operational understanding.

2. Case Reviews and Consulting

Many surgeons nearing retirement find case reviews and consulting work to be a fulfilling way to stay involved without the physical demands of surgery. Case reviews for legal purposes, insurance companies, or quality assurance programs can provide meaningful work that draws on a surgeon's depth of knowledge. Surgeons who enjoy detailed analysis and problem-solving often find these roles intellectually stimulating.

Consulting can also extend beyond clinical case reviews. Orthopaedic surgeons can offer insights on medical device development, healthcare innovation, and practice management. Consulting roles provide a way to stay connected to the evolving landscape of medicine while enjoying the freedom to set your own schedule.

3. Locum Tenens Work

For surgeons not quite ready to fully retire but who want more control over their work-life balance, locum tenens work is an attractive option. Locum tenens assignments allow surgeons to fill temporary positions in hospitals and clinics, often in areas with critical staffing shortages. These roles can vary in length, from a few days to several months, offering a level of flexibility that full-time roles cannot.

Locum tenens work offers several benefits for orthopaedic surgeons approaching retirement. It allows them to continue practicing clinically, maintain their surgical skills, and make a significant impact on patient care—especially in underserved areas—while providing the freedom to set their own pace. It's a way to stay engaged in surgery without the pressure of a long-term commitment.

Additionally, locum tenens roles often offer competitive pay and can include travel opportunities. For many, it's a chance to experience different healthcare environments and geographic regions, which adds a level of adventure to their semi-retired life.

4. Telemedicine and Remote Consultations

While less common in surgery-heavy specialties like orthopaedics, telemedicine has become a growing field, particularly in providing follow-up care, second opinions, and consultations. Some

orthopaedic surgeons use telemedicine platforms to offer remote patient consultations, often collaborating with local healthcare providers or assessing post-surgical recovery. This option provides the ultimate flexibility in terms of location and schedule.

While telemedicine may not replace the operating room for most orthopaedic surgeons, it offers a way to stay involved in patient care while reducing the physical demands of in-person consultations and surgery.

The Career Outlook for Semi-Retirement

For those orthopaedic surgeons who aren't ready to fully retire but want to scale back from full-time practice, the outlook is bright. There is a growing demand for experienced physicians of all specialties in part-time, consulting, and leadership roles. Healthcare systems facing staffing shortages, particularly in rural or underserved areas, actively seek out semi-retired physicians to help fill the gaps.

The evolving landscape of healthcare delivery—especially the rise of telemedicine and flexible working arrangements—has created new opportunities for surgeons who want to continue working without the rigors of a full-time operating schedule. This shift toward flexibility benefits both surgeons and the healthcare system, allowing physicians to extend their careers while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Redefining Retirement for orthopaedic Surgeons

Retirement for orthopaedic surgeons no longer has to mean an abrupt end to their professional lives. Instead, many are redefining what it means to retire by pursuing fulfilling second and third acts that allow them to stay engaged in their field. Whether stepping into leadership, consulting, taking on locum tenens assignments, or exploring telemedicine, there are numerous paths available for surgeons who want to continue contributing without the physical demands of full-time surgery.

For the 60% of orthopaedic surgeons reaching retirement age in the next decade, the future is full of possibilities. By planning ahead and considering alternative career options now, these surgeons can ensure a smooth and rewarding transition into the next phase of their careers—one that keeps them connected to the profession they've dedicated their lives to, while also allowing for more personal time and freedom.

Whether you are seeking your first orthopaedic surgery job or looking at options for your second act, AAOS ACCELERATE is the official career exploration platform of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. The platform allows you to see all the relevant practices in your preferred area, so you can conduct an interactive, map-based search. [Start searching for orthopaedic surgery jobs online today.](#) If you have questions about the process or prefer a more

personalized recruitment experience, reach out to the recruitment team at [Jackson Physician Search](#), the only AAOS-endorsed physician recruitment firm.