

Sternal Precautions after Heart Surgery

After chest surgery, it is important to protect your sternum (breast bone) so that it heals. Below are some guidelines. Always follow your doctor's advice. Call your doctor if you have questions.

For the first 6 to 8 weeks

You can use your arms as long as you avoid causing chest strain or pain.

- Stop if you feel pain or if you feel or hear clicking in your chest.
- Be careful when reaching over your head.
 - Avoid repetitive reaching overhead.
 - Do not reach overhead to lift weighted items.
- Be careful when reaching behind your back. Do not reach back with both arms at the same time.
- Do not use your arms to lift, push or pull anything over 10 pounds.

Daily activities

Getting out of bed:

- Bend your knees.
- Roll to your side. You may want to cross your arms over your chest or hold a pillow.
- Hang your legs over the side of the bed.
- Gently use your elbow for support and come to sitting.

Standing up:

- Scoot your hips to the edge of the chair or bed.
- Lean forward so your shoulders are over your knees.
- To protect your chest, cross your arms over your chest or hold a pillow.
- Use your leg strength to stand.
- If you need to use your arms to help you balance, your therapist will show you safe ways to stand up or how to use a walker or cane.

Sitting down:

- Make sure you feel the bed or chair on the back of your legs.
- To protect your chest, cross your arms over your chest or hold a pillow.
- Use your leg strength to lower yourself to sitting.
- If you need to use your arms to help you balance, your therapist will show you safe ways to sit down or how to use a walker or cane.

Getting into bed:

- Sit near the head of the bed (so your head will be on the pillow once you lie down).
- Gently lower yourself to your side and bring your feet onto the bed.
- Roll from your side to your back.
 - You may want to cross your arms over your chest or hold a pillow.
 - Do not reach behind your back.
- When needed, use your legs to help change position in bed.

Self care

Bathing:

- Follow your doctor's advice about when you can shower or bathe.
- When you are allowed to shower, avoid direct spray on your incision. Clean the area by patting it. Do not rub.
- Use a bath chair if it is hard to get out of the tub or shower.
- Avoid pulling on a grab bar, especially with only one hand.
- You can reach up to wash your hair. If you feel chest strain, try using one hand at a time or ask for help.

Dressing:

- Do not reach overhead or behind your back if it strains your chest.
- Do not reach back with both arms at the same time.
- Your therapist can show you ways to dress or tools that can help.

Toilet:

- Use a raised toilet seat if it is hard to get up from the toilet.

Simple tasks

You may do light household tasks as long as you avoid strain to your chest.

- Do not lift more than 10 pounds.
 - A gallon of milk weighs about 8 pounds
 - A bag of groceries weighs 10 to 12 pounds
 - A full laundry basket weighs up to 25 pounds
 - When you are with children or pets, stay within lifting restrictions.
- Do not strain your chest by lifting or pulling with one arm. For example, do not:
 - Open a heavy door or car door
 - Carry a grocery bag with one hand
 - Lift or pull with one arm when doing laundry
 - Vacuum
- For the first 2 weeks, do not reach for or lift objects from cupboards or shelves. Store needed items on lower shelves so you can reach them more easily.
- After 2 weeks, you may reach for light objects from cupboards or shelves.
- Ask your doctor when you may drive.

Exercise

During the first 6 to 8 weeks, it is important to work toward getting stronger. Follow the exercise advice your therapist gave you.

- Pay attention to your posture. Stand straight and avoid rounding your shoulders so you don't get stiff or sore.
- Outpatient cardiac rehabilitation may help your recovery.

Suggestions: _____

