Safe Activities after Heart or Lung Surgery

How will I feel after surgery?

• You may get tired more easily. Listen to your body and be sure to get enough rest. This will allow your heart and lungs to heal quickly and safely.

• Itching, numbness, soreness and swelling at top of the incision (surgical cut) are normal. These will go away gradually.

• It is normal to feel angry, scared or depressed after surgery. Talk to your care team if you need help or these symptoms aren’t getting better.

Activity guidelines

After surgery, you will also need to wait a while before doing certain activities. You will need to protect your surgical cut and sternum (breastbone) so you can heal. Follow the guidelines in this handout unless your surgeon gives you different advice. Stop your activity if you feel or hear clicking in your chest or have pain.

Bathing

No tub baths for 8 weeks. Once you can bathe, avoid pulling on a grab bar, especially with only one hand. Use a bath chair if it is hard to get out of the tub.

Showering

Your surgeon will let you know when you can shower. Once you can shower, gently clean the area with antibacterial soap, like Dial. Don’t rub the area or get the shower spray directly on your incision.

Reaching

Don’t reach overhead or reach back with both arms at the same time for 2 weeks. After 2 weeks, you may reach overhead, but not repeatedly. (Use both arms together, if needed.)

Light tasks

It is okay to do light tasks like brushing your hair and teeth, washing your hair or light household tasks. Be gentle and avoid straining your chest.

Driving

Wait at least 4 weeks before driving and until you are no longer taking narcotic pain medicine. Medicines, weakness, fatigue and stiffness or soreness can affect your driving.

• Before driving again: Take a short test drive with another driver. Check that your reaction time is normal and you can turn your head to check “blind spots.”

• After you’ve had a test drive and are ready to start driving again: Start off by driving shorter distances and familiar routes. Consider the time of day, traffic and weather.

Riding in a car

You may ride in the front seat. Cushion your chest with a small pillow placed under your seat belt.

Pulling

Don’t do activities that pull on your arms for 8 weeks (walking the dog, pulling open a heavy door, taking laundry out of the dryer).
Lifting and pushing

- **First 6 weeks:** Don’t lift or push anything that weighs more than 10 pounds (such as a full bag of groceries or basket of laundry, vacuum, lawn mower, stroller).

- **Weeks 6 to 12:** Don’t lift or push anything that weighs more than 20 pounds.

- **After 12 weeks:** There are no lifting restrictions unless your doctor tells you differently.

Getting into bed

1. Sit near the head of the bed (so your head will be on the pillow when you lie down).
2. Gently lower yourself onto your side and bring your feet onto the bed.
3. Roll from your side to your back. You may want to cross your arms over your chest or hug a pillow. Don’t reach behind you.
4. When needed, use your legs to help you change positions.

Getting out of bed

1. Bend your knees.
2. Roll to your side. Cross your arms over your chest or hug a pillow.
3. Hang your legs over the side of the bed.
4. Gently use your elbow for support as you come to a sitting position.

Standing up

1. Scoot your hips to the edge of the chair or bed.
2. Cross your arms over your chest or hug a pillow
3. Lean forward so your shoulders are over your knees.
4. Use your leg strength to stand up.
5. Use a raised toilet seat if it is hard to get up from the toilet.

Sitting down

1. Make sure you feel the bed or chair at the back of your legs.
2. Cross your arms over your chest or hug a pillow.
3. Use your leg strength to lower yourself.

Getting dressed

- Remember, don’t reach overhead or reach back with both arms at the same time for 2 weeks. After 2 weeks, avoid these motions if they strain your chest.

- Your therapist can show you ways to dress or tools that can help.

Getting stronger

Rehab therapy helps prepare you physically, mentally and emotionally for your return to work and normal life. Plan to attend rehab for at least 12 weeks or as instructed by your therapist. Some tips:

- Follow any exercise advice from your therapist.
- Pay attention to your posture. Stand straight and avoid rounding your shoulders so you don’t get stiff or sore.

Going back to work

Ask your doctor when you can return to work.

- If you have a desk job, plan to take at least 4 weeks off work.
- If your job involves physical labor, it may be 12 weeks before you can go back to work.

Tip: If you need to use your arms for balance, your therapist can show you safe ways to stand, sit or use a walker or bath chair.