Exercise After Lung Surgery with Thoracotomy Incision

What you need to know to live a healthy, active lifestyle

Be Careful After Surgery

Incision Precautions:  □ Both arms  □ Right arm  □ Left arm

For 4 weeks after surgery, DO NOT:

- Lift, push, or pull things heavier than 20 pounds. This may include pets, children, garbage, laundry, groceries (1 gallon of milk weighs 8 pounds), unscrewing a tight lid, or opening a heavy door.
- Garden, rake, or mow the lawn.
- Drive a car or truck. Your reaction time is slower and you are at higher risk for injuring your sternum.
- Reach overhead with one hand (use both arms together)
- Reach behind you, as it will stretch the incision.

For 4 to 6 weeks after surgery, DO NOT:

- Run or swim.
- Bike vigorously.
- Play sports like tennis, golf, softball, or bowling, or any other sport that could risk injury to your sternum.

Add or Keep Exercise in Your Lifestyle

Talk with your doctor about when you can begin to exercise. The right exercise will help you:

- Decrease your back, shoulder, and chest muscle pain.
- Increase your endurance and your body’s efficiency.
- Maintain mobility and muscle tone.
- Control your blood pressure, lose weight, and reduce boredom.

Your health care providers suggest that you exercise regularly as part of your recovery. You should talk to your doctor about the details of your exercise program. This information will help guide you while you recover from surgery, and explain how to increase your activities safely.

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Exercise Goals

- Slowly work up to walking at least 40 minutes a day.
  - Avoid vigorous walking for 4 to 6 weeks.
  - Start walking 2 to 3 times a day until you reach 20 minutes nonstop, then once a day is fine.
  - Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes.
  - Treadmills are fine.
  - Don’t forget the return trip and don’t walk until you are tired.
  - Wait one hour after you eat to exercise.
- Do warm-up and cool down exercises for 5 minutes before and after you do your walking exercises (see exercise handout).

Pay Attention to Your Body

Slow down if:

- You find you are very short of breath for more than 10 minutes after stopping exercise.
- You feel more tired than normal the day after exercise.
- You can’t sleep.
- Your arthritis flares up.
- You feel pain in your joints, heel, or calf muscles.
- You get a “stitch” in your side (severe pain under your ribs).

Do not exercise if:

- You have a cold, flu, or fever.
- Your diabetes is out of control.
- You feel extreme emotional stress.
- You feel much more tired than normal.

Call your health care provider if:

- You have an abnormal heart activity.
- You have pain or pressure in your chest, arms, or throat.
- You are dizzy, light-headed, or fainting.
- You are confused or suddenly clumsy.