

Activities of Daily Living After Thoracotomy

Self-care for safety and healing

This handout gives important guidelines to help you heal and to keep you safe after surgery. It includes steps to follow when doing activities of daily living (ADLs), such as getting out of bed, putting on clothes, taking a shower, and more.

Thoracotomy Precautions

Follow the thoracotomy precautions in this handout to make sure you heal well. Do **not** use pain as a guide for what movements are safe and not safe to do. Let your provider decide when you are fully healed and can use your arms normally again.

These precautions are typically in place for 4–6 weeks or until your care team tells you otherwise. Follow these precautions for your: ☐ **Left arm** ☐ **Right arm**

- Do not lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 15 pounds (a gallon of milk weighs almost 9 pounds)
- Avoid raising your arm above shoulder height
- Avoid reaching behind your back

Getting Up

- Avoid pushing with your surgical-side arm when getting in and out of bed or standing up.
- If it is hard for you to stand up from sitting, your occupational therapist (OT) may suggest you use a pillow or foam cushion in your chair, and/or a raised toilet seat.

Getting Dressed

- Sit down when getting dressed to save energy and reduce risk of falling.
- **For button-down shirts and zip-up coats**, put your surgical-side arm into the sleeve first, then reach behind your back with your other arm to finish putting the shirt or coat on.
- **For t-shirts**, use your non-surgical-side arm to pull the shirt over your head.
- **For pants and underwear**, avoid reaching behind your back to pull them over your hips.
- If it is hard for you to get your lower body dressed, your OT may suggest you use a reacher, dressing stick, sock aid, and/or long-handled shoehorn.

Toileting

- After using the toilet, reach from the front or use your non-surgical arm to reach behind your back for hygiene.
- If this is hard to do, your OT may advise using a toileting tool or bidet.



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Bathing

- To wash your incision, gently massage mild soap on the area with your fingers. Do not scrub your incision.
- Keep your surgical-side arm at or below shoulder height when you wash and dry your hair and armpits.
- Sit to dry your body. To reach your back, flip a towel over the top of your head or put on a robe. Pat the incision dry.
- If showering is hard or tiring for you, your OT may suggest you use a shower chair, a hand-held shower head, a non-skid mat, and/or a long-handled sponge.



Other Activities

- Be mindful of your arm precautions when managing chores such as groceries, laundry, pet care, childcare, vacuuming, and yard work.
- Pace yourself throughout your daily routine and take rest breaks as needed.
- It is normal to feel tired, frustrated, or even depressed after surgery. Sometimes people cannot think as clearly as usual. Talk with your care team if these issues do not go away.
- Check with your provider before resuming the following activities:
 - Taking a bath, swimming, or sitting in a hot tub or sauna
 - High intensity activities such as running, riding a bike, bowling, skiing, golfing, tennis, or horseback riding
 - Operating a vehicle. On long drives, stop every hour to get out and walk briefly.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.