

Activities of Daily Living with Sternal Precautions

Self-care for safety and healing

This handout gives important guidelines to help you heal and keep you safe after heart 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.

Sternal Precautions

You will need to protect your *sternum* (breastbone) after surgery. **Until cleared by your provider**, follow these *sternal precautions*.

- Do **not** lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 10 pounds when using both arms, or 5 pounds when using 1 arm. (A gallon of milk weighs almost 9 pounds.)
- Do **not** put any of your body weight on your arms.
- Do **not** lean on your elbows. Do **not** use your arms to prop yourself up or adjust your position when you are lying down.
- When you are sitting, do **not** lean on your knees, armrests, or tables.
- Do **not** raise your elbow higher than your shoulders, unless you use both arms together and raise them **only** in front of your face. Always be aware of the positions of your elbows when using your arms.
- Do **not** reach behind your back or twist your body.
- Hug a pillow to your chest when you cough or sneeze. Do this also when you get in or out of bed, or when you move into a standing or sitting position. This will help to support your chest and decrease pain.
- When doing your activities of daily living (ADLs), follow the instructions in this handout.



After heart surgery, be very careful about how you use your arms.

Movement Guidelines

Getting into Bed

- Hug a pillow or cross your arms over your chest. Sit near the top third of the bed, as far back from the edge as you can.
- In one smooth motion, lie on your side and lift your legs up onto the bed. Keep your knees bent.
- Use your legs to help you roll like a log onto your back. You can push with your feet to scoot up or down in bed, but do **not** use your arms.



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Getting Out of Bed

See photos above.

- Hug a pillow or cross your arms over your chest.
- Bend your knees and roll onto your side without twisting your body.
- Move your feet off the bed. Pull your feet against the edge of the bed.
- You can **gently** use the side of your arm to start sitting up, but don't push your full body weight up with your arm. Use your stomach muscles to help you sit up. Keep your hands in front of you and your elbows to your side.
- Sit on the side of the bed for a few moments before you stand.

Standing Up from a Bed, Chair, or Toilet

- Hug a pillow or cross your arms over your chest. Scoot to the edge of the chair or bed without using your arms.
- Lean forward with your nose over your toes. Use your legs to stand.
- You may rest your hands on your thighs when coming to stand but do **not** place your arms on the bed or armrest.

If it is hard for you to stand up from sitting, your occupational therapist (OT) may suggest you use a higher bed, a pillow or foam cushion in your chair, or a raised toilet seat.

Clothing Guidelines

Taking off Shirts and Jackets

See photos to the right.

- Reach to the back of your collar with both hands. Pull the shirt over your head.
- When you remove the sleeves, do **not** let your elbows move behind your back.





Putting on Shirts Over Your Head

See photos above.

- Lay the front of the shirt in your lap with the collar at your knees.
- With the shirt still on your lap, start from the bottom of the shirt and slide your arms into the sleeves. Push the sleeves up past your elbows.
- Gather up the body of the shirt with your hands. Tuck your chin toward your chest. Keep your elbows below shoulder height as you place the shirt over your head.
- Adjust the shirt from the shoulders. Reach across your belly or from the sides as needed.

Tops that close in the front can be buttoned or zipped halfway, then pulled over the top of your head like a T-shirt.



Putting on Pants and Underwear

See photos above.

- Sit on a bed or chair. Reach forward and place your legs into the pants as you normally would.
- Stand and pull your pants up with your elbows **out to the side**.
- Hook your fingers into the waistband. Wiggle your hips and lean forward to pull the pants up into place.
- If it is hard for you to put on your pants and underwear, your OT may suggest you use a long-handled reacher or a dressing stick.

Putting on Socks and Shoes

- Sit on a bed or chair. Lift one leg and place your ankle onto the opposite knee. Or place your foot on a stool or the edge of the bed.
- Reach forward and slip on your sock or shoe as you normally would. Repeat with the other leg.
- To take off your socks or shoes, use the same method as above, or you can **briefly** bend over from a sitting position.

If it is hard for you to put on your socks and shoes, your OT may suggest you use a sock aid, reacher, and a long-handled shoehorn.



Make sure your leg is supported while you put on socks and shoes.

Surgical Bras and Chest Supports

Your team may recommend you wear a surgical bra or chest support after your surgery. These types of supports can help your wound heal by keeping your chest in place and preventing pulling on the wound. Your OT will train you in the best way to get these supports on and off.

There are several options available:

- Fruit of the Loom surgical bras are comfortable and have good support
- Any other designated surgical bra
- Binder-style supports (like a tube top)

As you think about which chest support is right for you, it's helpful to know:

- Sport bras are usually very snug and difficult to get on and off.
- Supports that close in the front are the easiest to get on and off.
- Underwire bras are **not** recommended because they can push on your wound.

Personal Hygiene Guidelines

Using the Toilet

- After using the toilet, clean yourself by reaching through your legs and wiping front to back. Do **not** reach behind your back.
- You may need to do a half squat position to reach, depending on the style of your toilet.
- A bidet (a device that sprays water) is another option for cleaning yourself.

If this is hard to do, your OT may suggest you use a toilet aid.



Bathing

See photos above.

For 6 weeks: Do **NOT** take a bath or soak in water. Follow the steps below to shower.

- To wash your incision, **gently** massage soap on the area with your fingers or a washcloth. Do **not** scrub your skin or wound.
- Wash your underarms and the side of your body by lifting your arm **only** to shoulder-level and reaching across your body. Wash between your legs by reaching front to back.
- Reach both hands to your head at the same time when you shampoo, rinse, and dry your hair. Keep your elbows in front of your face.
- Sit to dry your body. To reach your back, flip a towel over the top of your head or put on a terrycloth robe.

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 a bendable long-handled sponge.

Hair Care

To comb, style, or shave your hair:

- Raise your arms **only** to shoulder level. You may want to use one arm at a time and tilt your head to the side.

Other Activities

Until your provider says it is safe for you to resume these activities:

- Do **not** do any activities that can stress your sternum. This includes swimming, running, bowling, skiing, golf, tennis, horseback riding, and softball.
- Do **NOT** take a bath, go swimming, or sit in a hot tub or sauna.

- Have someone else do chores such as vacuuming, sweeping, mopping, and yard work.
- Do **not** lift anything that weighs more than 10 pounds. This includes groceries, laundry, furniture, pets, and children.
- Do **not** open tight jars, heavy doors, or heavy/stuck windows.
- Do **not** drive any vehicle until your provider says it is safe.
- On long drives, stop every hour to get out and walk briefly.

Self-care

- Be gentle with yourself. It is ok to ask for help while you are recovering.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Wash your incision every day by showering or sponge bathing at the sink.
- Get dressed every day.
- Eat nutritious meals.
- Go for walks and do the exercises your occupational therapist taught you.
- Slowly resume the activities you enjoy.
- It is normal to feel tired, frustrated, or even depressed after major surgery. Some people cannot think as clearly as usual. Talk with your care provider if these issues do not go away.

Questions?

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