

Exercise After Heart Surgery

To help you live a healthy, active life

Your healthcare providers advise you to exercise regularly as part of your recovery. Talk with your physical therapist, cardiologist, or primary healthcare provider about the details of your exercise program.

This handout will help guide you while you recover after surgery. It also explains how to increase your activities safely.

Sternal Precautions After Surgery

For 6 weeks after surgery, DO NOT:

- Lift, push, pull, or carry anything that weighs more than 10 pounds. This may include pets, children, garbage, laundry, and groceries (a gallon of milk weighs 8 pounds).
- Unscrew tight lids or open heavy doors.
- Reach above shoulder level with just 1 arm (use both arms together). For example, use both arms to reach for items on a high shelf in the kitchen or a closet.
- Reach behind you, since this will stretch your incision. For example, do not lean back on your arms or reach behind you to wipe after using the toilet.
- Vacuum, 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 (breastbone).



*For 6 weeks after surgery, do **not** lift anything that weighs more than 10 pounds. Ask for help doing tasks like carrying laundry or grocery shopping.*

For 3 months after surgery, DO NOT:

- Run, walk, bike, or swim vigorously
- Play sports like tennis, golf, softball, swimming, or bowling, or any other sport that could cause injury to your sternum

Add or Keep Exercise in Your Lifestyle

People who get regular exercise are less likely to suffer from chest pain (angina pectoris) or a heart attack (myocardial infarction). The right exercise will help you:

- Recover from your surgery
- 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
- Sleep better



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digital copy of
this handout.*

Exercise Goals

Slowly work up to walking at least **30 minutes every day**.

- Start by walking 3 times a day for about 5 minutes each time. Each week, increase the total time you walk by about 3 minutes until you are walking for a total of 30 minutes a day.
- Warm up and cool down for 5 minutes before and after you walk by doing exercises (see exercise handout), or by walking more slowly.
- Remember to add in the time for your return trip. Do not walk until you are tired.
- Exercise at a moderate level of effort (3 to 5 on a scale of 0 to 10)
- Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes.
- Wait 1 hour after you eat to exercise.
- Walk on flat ground.
- It is OK to walk on a treadmill at a slow speed (3.0 mph or less).



Slowly work up to walking at least 30 minutes every day.

Pay Attention to Your Body

Slow down if:

- Your body is working at more than a moderate level of effort (greater than 5 on a scale of 0 to 10).
- For more than 10 minutes after you STOP exercising, you are very short of breath or your pulse is 20 beats per minute higher than when you started exercising.
- You cannot sleep, or you feel more tired than normal the day after you exercise.
- You have arthritis and it flares up, or you feel pain in your joints, heels, or calf muscles.
- You have increased swelling in your legs or feet.

Do not exercise if:

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

Call your doctor if:

- You have pain or pressure in your chest, arms, or throat.
- You are dizzy, lightheaded, have blurry vision, or feel faint.
- You are confused or suddenly clumsy.

If you need medical care right away, call 9-1-1.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Your physical therapist will answer your questions about exercise during your therapy sessions in the hospital. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns about your medical care.