

Occupational Therapy After Heart Surgery

Helping you move safely

This handout explains what occupational therapy is and why it is important after cardiac surgery.

What is occupational therapy?

The word *occupation* refers to daily activities that give value and meaning to life. Occupation is everything people do to “occupy” themselves. These include basic self-care tasks, taking part in leisure activities, and working.

Occupational therapy (OT) is skilled training you will receive to help you do your *activities of daily living* (ADLs) after your surgery. ADLs include bathing, grooming, and dressing.

An occupational therapist is trained to help you do the meaningful occupations that affect your health and quality of life.

Why do I need OT?

After surgery, you will need to follow some *precautions* (safety measures) to help your incision heal. You will still be able to do your self-care tasks, but you will need to do them in a new way.

For example, your occupational therapist will show you ways to safely put on and take off shirts without stretching your incision. You may also need to use special bathroom equipment while you are healing. Some people use a raised toilet seat because it may be hard to get on and off a standard-height toilet after surgery.



Be sure to ask your occupational therapist any questions you have about moving safely after heart surgery.

What precautions do I need to follow?

The most common incision used in heart surgery divides your breastbone (*sternum*) down the middle. The bone is then wired back together with stainless steel or titanium wire. This wire will stay in your body for the rest of your life.

Your breastbone will take time to heal after surgery. This means you must avoid activities that put stress on your sternum for several weeks. This is called following *sternal precautions*.

For 6 weeks after surgery:

- Do **NOT** lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 10 pounds. (A gallon of water weighs almost 9 pounds.)
- Do **NOT** raise your elbows higher than your shoulders. The only exception is if you raise both arms together in front of your body.
- Do **NOT** reach behind your back.

What are the goals of OT?

The goal of each OT session is to help you do many of your daily self-care tasks and movements on your own. During your sessions, your occupational therapist will:

- Teach you and your family how to follow the sternal precautions listed above.
- Show you how to protect your incision while you do basic self-care tasks, such as bathing, dressing your upper body, using the toilet, and taking a shower.
- Teach you range-of-motion exercises to help your upper body regain its flexibility and strength.
- Assess what special bathroom equipment you may need while you are healing.

When will I meet my occupational therapist?

An occupational therapist will visit you the day after your surgery, while you are still in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). At this first visit, your therapist will:

- Assess your ability to do your daily self-care tasks.
- Assess your ability to get in and out of a chair and bed.

- Create a treatment plan to help you become as independent as possible before you are discharged.

What should I expect during my therapy sessions?

While you are still in the ICU, your therapist will:

- Work with your nurse to help you get in and out of your bed and a chair. They will show you how to move safely while your incision is healing.
- Help you begin to do simple self-care tasks such as brushing your teeth and washing your face. Of course, you already know how to do these tasks, but your therapist will teach you how to do them safely while you are healing.
- Teach you and your family or caregiver about your precautions and how they will affect how you do your self-care.

After you leave the ICU and move to a regular hospital room, your therapist will:

- Teach you and your family or caregiver how to protect your incision while you put on and take off shirts.
- Help you safely get on and off a toilet and in and out of a bath tub or shower. Your therapist may also suggest special bathroom equipment to help you safely do as much as you can on your own.
- Teach you how to protect your incision while you wipe yourself after using the toilet. **You cannot reach behind your back for at least 6 weeks after your surgery.** Your therapist may give you a special device to help you do this task safely on your own.
- Answer any questions you and your family or caregiver may have about how to safely do your self-care tasks on your own after surgery.
- Your therapist may also help you take your first shower after surgery. This will help you feel comfortable with showering. Your therapist will also teach you how to safely wash your incision in the shower.

Questions?

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

Please ask your occupational therapist any questions you have during your therapy sessions in the hospital.

We look forward to working with you. Thank you for following your precautions.