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Recovery After Your Heart Surgery

Now that you have had your heart surgery, you may be wondering how long it will take you to get back to normal. How quickly you recover differs for each person, but the harder you work, the quicker your recovery will be. Be patient, take one day at a time, and you will slowly regain your strength over the next few weeks. Following the guidelines and tips included here will help you care for yourself during your first weeks at home.

Common discomforts you may experience during your recovery:

Pain Between the Shoulder Blades: The discomfort between the shoulder blades is from the manipulation of that area during surgery and “slumping” when you walk. Take your pain medication as prescribed; a heating pad or massage to the affected area may help. Try to maintain good posture and avoid “slumping.” The pain usually gets better in a few weeks.

Shoulder and Chest Pains When You Move or Turn: It is normal to be sore. Despite the discomfort, it is important to continue to use your arms, but keep the arm activities light. Avoid lifting anything weighing more than 10 pounds for the first two weeks.

Difficulty Lying Flat: Sleeping in bed may be uncomfortable at first. Try resting in a recliner or on the couch propping your body up with a few pillows. Usually, after a few weeks you begin to sleep better. It will take a little longer before you feel comfortable lying on your side or stomach.

Swollen Feet & Ankles: It is common for swelling to occur in the leg where the vein was removed. To reduce the swelling, elevate your feet. If the swelling is significant or fails to improve with elevation, contact your doctor.

Dizziness: Be sure to rise slowly, and do it in steps. Start by sitting on the edge of the bed then stand up slowly. If you are experiencing dizziness, be sure to have someone nearby to help you so that you don't fall. If the dizziness persists, call your doctor; it could be related to your medications.

The “Bump”: At the top of your chest incision, you might have a “bump.” This area will smooth out in 4 to 6 weeks. If the bump increases in size or becomes red or tender, contact your surgeon.

Feelings That Your Heart is “Loose” in Your Chest: You may notice that your heart feels “loose” in your chest. It really isn't loose, it just feels that way. You may also hear your heart beating when everything is quiet, or “feel” it beating in your head or neck. These strange sensations and sounds lessen with time.

Sleeping Problems: You may have trouble going to sleep or sleeping throughout the night. This usually gets better in a month or so. If you are taking long naps during the day, try setting the alarm clock so you only nap for an hour or so. Work at getting back into a normal sleeping pattern.

Constipation: It is common following heart surgery to be constipated due to decreased activity, stress, medications, and changes in your diet and eating habits. When constipation occurs, avoid straining and use a mild laxative such as Milk of Magnesia or a stool softener.

Emotions: Sadness is normal during the post-discharge recovery period. Feeling “blue,” being “down in the dumps,” or having “cabin fever” is a normal part of the recovery period. Just as your sleep cycle returns to normal, so too will your moods. On some occasions, normal sadness will become a more serious depression. Symptoms of depression include not wanting to return to normally enjoyable activities; continued fatigue or lethargy, even with continuing medical improvement; and a feeling of not being lovable, worthy, or competent. Again, depression is not unusual and should be brought to the attention of your physician. It is important to control your emotional stress both at home and at work. Share emotional responsibilities with others. Try to avoid upsetting situations, but if unavoidable, concentrate on relaxing when these situations arise.

Appetite: Even though your appetite may be poor, it is important to eat a balanced diet to help your body heal. If you have been on a sodium restriction, please continue to restrict your salt and sodium. Continue to follow a low fat and low cholesterol diet at home or when eating out.

Activity: Mornings are the hardest time of the day. Once you’ve been up and moving around, you will begin to feel better. Remember to pace your activities and yourself.

Guidelines for resuming normal activities...

Carefully observe these guidelines. They should also be observed by family and friends who wish to help you return to your optimal level of health and physical activity.

Physical Activity: Generally, a slow, progressive approach to resuming your previous activity is best for your heart. You should eventually be able to perform household tasks, participate in recreational activities, and return to work. Complete resumption of normal activities, however, usually occurs after 4 to 6 weeks healing period. Don’t expect an instant recovery, and don’t resume activities at your previous levels. Alternate your activities throughout the day with rest periods. Remember, any significant period of enforced bed rest or inactivity (2 weeks or more) results in a decrease in your previous activity level. It takes at least as much time to return to your regular activity level as the amount of time you were inactive. Before returning to full-time work, resuming major household tasks, participating in recreational activities, or driving check with your physician.

Activities to Avoid: Activities involving excessive pulling, pushing, lifting, or breath holding should generally be avoided. These activities require more work from the heart muscle and may impair the healing process of the sternal incision.

The following activities are recommendations for general activities during the first 4 to 6 weeks at home. Check with your physician for any specific individual instructions you are to follow.

One and Two Weeks After Discharge:

Permitted Activities

- Personal hygiene (bathing, dressing)
- Basic food preparation
- Desk work (reading, typing, writing)
- Riding in a car (wearing a seatbelt)
- Light entertainment (cards, watching TV, board or computer games)
- Craft work (sewing, knitting)
- Social activities (church, visiting friend/family)
- Level walking
- Slow stair climbing when necessary

Activities to Avoid

- Straining or lifting over 10 lbs
- Walking grades or hills
- Activities in extreme temperature
- Sweeping, mowing, or hedge cutting
- Competitive activities
- Walking medium or large dog
- Carpentry, painting
- Driving

Three and Four Weeks After Discharge:

Permitted Activities

- All activities of Weeks 1 and 2
- Light Housework (dusting, dishwashing, folding clothes)
- Grocery shopping and errands
- Playing musical instruments
- Using light hand and power tools
- Walking slight grades
- Sexual intercourse
- Ballroom dancing (slow paced)
- Pumping gas
- Light garden work (weeding, planting small plants, no digging)
- Golf (putting only)
- Driving (if approved by your doctor)

Activities to Avoid

- Straining or lifting activities over 20 lbs
- Walking steep grades or hills
- Activities in extreme temperatures
- Competitive activities
- Sweeping, mowing, or hedge cutting
- Carpentry, painting

Five and Six Weeks After Discharge:

Permitted Activities

- All activities of Weeks 3 and 4
- Housework (sweeping, laundry, windows, vacuuming, ironing, changing bed sheets)
- Light auto maintenance
- Light carpentry, gardening, & painting
- Golf (pitching and putting range only)
- Catching and tossing baseball or softball

Activities to Avoid

- Activities in extreme temperatures
- Walking steep hills
- Shoveling, mowing or hedge cutting
- No golf driving range until 3 months after discharge
- No football, basketball, or bowling

Driving: You may resume driving at your surgeon's discretion – usually in 2 to 4 weeks. Avoid sitting for long periods of time. When sitting, do not cross your legs. When riding in a car, limit trips to 1 to 2 hours. If longer trips are necessary, stop and take a 5 to 10 minute stretch-and-walk break every 1 to 2 hours. Wear your seatbelt and shoulder harness.

Stairs: Begin slowly. Pace yourself: Walk three to four steps (both feet on each step), pause, then continue. If you have a leg incision, lead going up with the leg that doesn't have the incision. After 1 or 2 weeks, you may eliminate the pauses and climb stairs alternating steps in the usual pattern.

Sexual Activity: How soon you resume sexual activity after leaving the hospital depends on your progress and how you feel when returning home. A general recommendation is to wait several weeks following hospital discharge. Some basic guidelines include the following:

- Discuss with your partner any fears or anxieties you might have regarding sex, and rest assured that your incisions won't open and your breastbone won't come apart during sex.
- Use nonstrenuous positions and a comfortable room temperature.
- Avoid twisting movements until your breastbone has healed.
- Choose a time when you both feel rested.
- Take your time. Give yourselves a chance to become aroused.
- Wait at least 1 hour after eating, taking a bath or shower, or exercising before you have sex.
- Do not consume alcoholic beverages for approximately 3 hours before sexual activity.
- If you begin to have chest pain/discomfort or severe shortness of breath during sexual activity, stop for a few minutes. If it doesn't go away, or comes back when you resume, call your doctor.
- If you cannot become aroused, talk with your doctor. Some medications, such as beta-blockers, affect sexual response. Your doctor may be able to change the medication or the dose.

Remember having sex is only one part of being intimate. Try hugging, kissing, touching, or caressing at first. They help you both feel close and wanted. When you feel ready for sex focus on giving each other pleasure. Foreplay and mutual stimulation are more important than having an orgasm.

Temperature Extremes: Initially avoid activity outdoors when temperatures are cold (below 32 F) or hot (above 80 to 85 F or when the humidity is high. Avoid extreme temperatures such as steam baths, saunas, spas, and whirlpools.

Bathing: You may take a warm bath or shower each day. Wash your incision gently with soap and water' pay dry (don't rub).

Incision Care: Bathe regularly and do not use creams or lotions on incisions until they are healed. Do not wear constrictive clothing around the area of incision. Women, however, may wear bras. It is NOT unusual to have small amounts of clear, yellow, watery drainage from the incisions, particularly of the legs. This type of drainage is not a sign of infection. It is also not unusual to have some separation of the wound edges. If clear drainage or wound separation occurs, begin twice daily cleansing of these areas with **hydrogen peroxide** and keep them covered with a clean dressing. Call your cardiac surgeon if any of your incisions become reddened, warm to the touch, swollen, or develops drainage of thick fluid.

Body Weight: Check your weight every day, in the morning, for the first 2 weeks. If you notice a sudden weight gain, notify your cardiac surgeon.

When to Slow Down...

Slow down if you feel any of the following symptoms. They are signs you are going too fast.

- Chest pain or discomfort with or without radiation to your arm, neck, jaw, or shoulder
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Trouble breathing, feeling very tired or weak
- Pounding or fluttering in your chest
- Breaking out in a cold sweat, especially with nausea or vomiting
- Increased pain in or around your incision or in your legs

When to Call Your Doctor...

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following signs of a problem.

- Sudden onset of chest pain not gradually relieved by rest or prescribed medication.
- Redness, swelling or drainage from your incision
- Instability of breastbone—excessive movement or clicking sounds
- Leg pain or unusual swelling of legs or ankles
- Body temperatures above 100 F
- Shortness of breath not relieved by rest
- Dizziness, confusion, or fainting
- An episode of rapid heartbeats, or more than 100 irregular heartbeats per minute

Home Exercise...

The first day you are home, take it easy. On the second day, begin your exercise program with some type of aerobic exercise (i.e. walking). Do this 3 times/day, 5-10 minutes at a time. When you can do this comfortably, cut down to 2 times/day for 15 minutes. Work to establish a regimen of exercising 30-45 minutes (or walking a mile/day) 5 times per week.

Your Role in Your Recovery...

Much of your recovery is up to you. Your doctor and other health care providers are there to help you. But YOU need to care for your body and slowly rebuild your strength. That means doing a little more each day—without pushing yourself too hard.

Tips to remember...

- Take your medications as directed.
- Move carefully to protect your incision and your breastbone.
- Pace yourself.
- Alternate difficult tasks with easy ones and rest for 15 to 30 minutes between tasks/activities.
- Plan ahead to avoid rushing.
- With any activity you are doing you should be able to perform that activity and carry on a conversation comfortably.
- Exercise 5 days a week. Increase your time and your pace slowly.
- Talk with your family and close friends about how you feel and what you need from them.
- HAVE FUN!!!