

Heart Surgery: Moving Along Your Recovery Path

After heart surgery, you will move from Intensive Care to Progressive Care or Step-Down Care.

“When you get to the step-down unit, you can be a little bit more independent and it makes you feel like you’re really working towards being independent at home too and getting- getting ready to go home.”

When you first begin Step-Down care, you will still be weak from your surgery. But now, as you get stronger, you will become an active participant in your own recovery. Work with your cardiac care team to set goals for your recovery. These are goals that you will need to reach before you can leave the hospital.

A main goal of recovery will be to increase your activity level. With help, begin to get out of bed and move around. It’s important to protect your chest incision and chest bone as you get out of bed. To do this, roll over onto your shoulder and swing your legs to the side of the bed. Use your elbow to push yourself up, keeping your arms close to your body. Avoid using your upper body for support until your incision has a chance to heal.

You are at an increased risk of falling so for your safety, always follow your care team’s direction when moving. Because of your increased fall risk, there may be tools you can use to help you balance while you walk. You can use a railing to steady yourself, but use your legs, don’t pull yourself up with your arms. Sit in a chair instead of your bed to eat your meals, keeping your legs elevated. And with help gradually increase the amount you walk. Walk to the restroom. Walk around your room. And when you are ready, walk down the hallway and back. Talk to your Cardiac care team before trying this on your own.

Begin to do your breathing exercises without help. Breathing exercises strengthen your lungs, improve your breathing and prevent lung infections like pneumonia, so do them as often as your Cardiac care team tells you to. Incentive Spirometry helps you breathe easier by helping you breathe deeper. Your cardiac care team will help you learn to use the Incentive Spirometer and set goals for you to work up to.

Controlled Coughing opens up the tiny air sacs in your lungs and helps get rid of any excess mucus that built up during surgery. It may be painful at first because of your incisions but it is important so talk to your Cardiac care team about ways to reduce any discomfort. Use a pillow or hard cushion to hug while you do your controlled coughing exercises and repeat the exercises as often as directed.

Doing both breathing exercises together, first by using the incentive spirometer and then by doing your controlled coughing exercises will help speed up your recovery and reduce the possibilities of complications. To help improve your circulation and reduce swelling in your legs, you may be asked to wear support stockings. As you get stronger and move along your recovery path, take an active role in your care. Work to reach the goals set with your Cardiac care team.

Successfully meeting your recovery goals can give you the confidence you need to handle more and more daily activities and further progress your recovery.