

Your Care at Home: Sternal Wound Care

*****Your Care at Home: Sternal Wound Care*****

Narrator

You've just had open heart surgery and, congratulations, it's time to go home. But before you leave the hospital, make sure you and your caregivers are comfortable providing the care you'll need at home. In the next few minutes, we're going to show you some best practices for caring for your sternal wound. But, each patient responds to and recovers from surgery differently. So, be sure to ask your healthcare provider about your specific needs and always follow his or her advice.

A nurse or licensed care provider at the hospital should have taught you how to care for your sternal wound, allowing you and your family to ask any questions and demonstrate that you can provide the proper care. Take advantage of this. It will give you greater peace of mind as you go home. The incision from open heart surgery is called a sternal wound because it runs down the middle of your chest bone, or sternum. You may have a lump at the top of your incision, but that's normal. It will go away with time.

Chest incision infections are relatively rare after open heart surgery, but they are serious. That's why you may have received antibiotics before you went in for surgery. So it's very important now that you're home to know the warning signs of infection. Every day, after thoroughly washing your hands, inspect your incision, looking for anything unusual that might indicate an infection. Signs of infection include:

- Increased tenderness along the incision,
- Increased redness or swelling around the incision,
- Any drainage from the wound, or
- A persistent fever.

If you experience any of these signs, call your healthcare provider.

Another possible complication could be a clicking sound in your chest when breathing, coughing or moving the first days after surgery. This should occur less and less frequently and go away completely within the first couple of weeks. If it gets worse, call your surgeon.

Caring for your wound is not complicated. You can wash your incision gently with mild, non-perfumed soap and warm water. Gently wash your incision using an up-and- down motion. Avoid vigorous scrubbing. Pat it dry with a clean towel.

Do not apply any creams, oils, lotions or powders, unless prescribed by your cardiac surgeon. You can take a shower after your pacing wires and staples are out, but no baths until your incision heals. In the shower, stand with your back to the spray so it's not directly hitting your chest, and avoid extremely hot water.

In some cases, your surgeon may have chosen a vacuum assisted closure for your wound, commonly referred to as wound VAC, that increases blood flow, decreases infections and improves healing. With VAC, there is a foam-like piece cut to fit the wound and a clear, sterile dressing taped on top. A vacuum tube connected to a pump is then placed over the dressing. The wound VAC dressing is changed every 2-3 days by a medical professional. VAC is generally safe and well tolerated, but, as with any wound, contact your healthcare provider right away if you notice any bleeding or signs of infection.

There are some general things to keep in mind as you're trying to get back into a normal routine after open heart surgery. The best advice? Don't overdo it! Light housework is ok, if you can handle it comfortably, but no lifting, pushing or pulling anything more than 10 pounds for 6 weeks after surgery. Don't vacuum, mow the grass or move furniture. You can ride in a car any time after surgery, but no driving, outdoor bicycling or motorcycle rides for at least 6 weeks.

Each person progresses at a different rate after surgery, so discuss your exercise plan with your healthcare provider before your discharge. Walking is a good form of exercise and helps strengthen your heart. Do it at an easy pace and rest if you get tired.

Unless you've been told not to, climbing stairs in moderation is fine. Again, watch your pace and stop if you need a break. Hold the railing to steady yourself, but don't pull yourself up with your arms, use your legs. Avoid baths, hot tubs or swimming until your healthcare provider says it's ok. And protect your incision from the sun the first year after surgery.

If your surgeon took a vein from your leg during surgery, there are some important things to remember as you are healing. First, raise your leg on a stool or chair when you are sitting. Do not cross your legs, this can lower your circulation. Check your leg daily for swelling, and if it continues to swell, even after elevating the leg, contact your healthcare provider.

Taking your medicines exactly as prescribed is another important part of getting better. Make sure you understand the name of each medicine, what it's for, how often and how much to take. Do not take any other medicines, including over-the-counter ones, without checking first with your healthcare provider.

One other point worth mentioning if you're diabetic. Just as they likely did during surgery, providing an insulin drip to ensure your glucose levels remained at appropriate levels, you need to watch those levels at home, too. If those levels begin to vary more than usual, contact your healthcare provider.

As you are healing, take it easy and protect your chest bone as you get out of bed or a chair. First, the bed. 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. Do not push with your hands! For getting out of a chair, you may want to hold a small pillow over your chest. Work yourself to the front edge of the chair. Keeping your feet flat on the floor directly under your knees, lean forward, push down with your legs and stand up. Again, do not pull or push with your arms!

Open heart surgery, and all that follows it, can be overwhelming, even a little scary. Take one day at a time and ask questions if there is anything that you don't understand. Your healthcare team is there to help get you through this.