

Post-op Recovery and Sternum Care

During your open-heart surgery, your surgeon made an incision into your breastbone, or sternum. This cut was done to reach your heart.

After the surgery, this wound needs time to heal. As it does, you can protect it from getting infected and pulling apart.

Your care team will show you how.

These tips may also help as you recover in the hospital and at home.

First, clean your wound as often as your care team advises. To do so:
Always wash your hands well before touching your wound.

Then gently wash your wound with mild soap and warm water. Don't scrub.

Pat dry with a clean towel.

Don't soak your wound in water until it fully heals. That means no swimming or taking a bath.

Every day, also watch for signs of infection like a fever.

And check your incision for: increased redness, increased tenderness, swelling, or fluid leaking.

Tell your care team right away if you notice any of these signs.

“And so you need to be careful to let the bones heal as well as the skin and the muscles and the heart.”

To prevent strain on your healing breastbone, your care team may advise limiting arm movement and other activities like the following.

Stop any activity that causes pain or discomfort. When moving, you may hear a clicking noise for the first couple weeks. It should go away over time.

When reaching for something, stand close and directly in front of the object. Don't reach for anything above your shoulders. Instead ask for help.

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“It was tough, you know you're used to taking care of a lot of things around the house. And after the surgery and there wasn't a lot I could do for quite a while.”

Also don't lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 10 pounds.

When getting out of bed, roll to your side and scoot to the edge. Then let your legs drop to the floor. Use your elbow to slowly sit up.

Continue to do your deep breathing and coughing exercises as directed. They help prevent pneumonia and other problems.

Keep a firm pillow close by. Hold it tightly to your chest when coughing or sneezing. Finally, don't drive until your care team tells you it is safe to do so.

Your care team may give you and your caregivers other instructions. Follow them as directed.

Reach out if you have any questions or concerns. Your care team is here to help.