

Heart Valve Repair or Replacement: Before Your Surgery

Your heart has four valves that work like one-way gates. They open and close to keep blood moving through your heart. When the heart valves are very tight and narrow or don't close as they should, blood doesn't flow through the heart as it should.

Heart valve surgery treats damaged valves so that blood can flow smoothly through the heart again. The surgery may be done to repair the damage. Or the surgery may be done to replace the valve. If the valve is replaced, the new valve may be made of plastic, metal, or animal tissue.

Before the surgery, you will get medicine so that you'll be asleep during the surgery. Most often, the doctor will start the surgery by making a large cut in the middle or side of your chest and may cut through your sternum—your breastbone—to spread apart your rib cage.

The doctor may use a retractor to be able to work on the heart. A heart-lung machine is used during the surgery to circulate the blood through your body, so the doctor can work on your heart.

The doctor will repair the damaged valve or will replace it with a new valve. To finish the surgery, you'll be taken off the heart-lung machine. Then your chest will be closed.

Before the surgery, tell your doctor about all the medicines and natural health products you take, especially blood thinners, like aspirin. Some can raise the risk of bleeding or cause problems with anesthesia.

Your doctor will tell you which medicines to take or stop before surgery. And follow your doctor's directions for preparing for your surgery, including when you should stop eating and drinking.

Bring your photo ID, insurance card, and any paperwork your hospital may have asked for. Healing takes time. And recovery has many steps, including time in the hospital, time at home, and making heart-healthy lifestyle changes.

Everyone heals at their own pace. But it can help when you know what to expect. And remember to be kind to yourself.