

Open-Heart Surgery: Returning Home

After you have open-heart surgery, it will take some time for your body to heal.

How long is different for each person.

But it's likely that you will feel tired and sore for the first few weeks.

You may have some brief, sharp pains on either side of your chest.

Your chest, shoulders, and upper back may ache.

The incision in your chest may be sore or swollen.

These symptoms usually get better after 4 to 6 weeks.

And over time, you should continue to heal and feel better.

Now it's important to be careful with activity for a few weeks.

You will probably be able to do many of your usual activities after 4 to 6 weeks.

But for 2 to 3 months, you will not be able to lift heavy objects or do activities that strain your chest or upper arm muscles.

At first you may notice that you get tired easily and need to rest often.

It may take 1 to 2 months to get your energy back.

Don't do any activity too quickly or too intensely.

If you have any pain while doing something, you might be doing too much.

It's okay to rest when you need to.

You'll probably be able to move around the house and do light household chores, like doing the dishes or setting the table.

But avoid doing things that strain your chest, like mowing the lawn or vacuuming.

You can lift light things, like laptops, dishes, or smaller books.

But don't lift anything heavy, like grocery bags or backpacks.

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You can take a shower with your back to the showerhead.

Allow the warm and soapy water to run across your shoulders and down over the incision.

But don't soak the site or take a bath for 3 weeks or until your doctor says it's okay.

Pat the incision dry with a clean towel.

It may seem like a lot to do and remember, but don't worry.

Before you go home, you'll meet with the staff to go through your care plan.

The plan will include information about checkups, specialist care, any ongoing tests you may need, and who to call if there's a problem.

This is a great time to ask questions.

Your plan will also include having a heart-healthy lifestyle.

This lifestyle includes eating healthy foods, being active, staying at a healthy weight, and not smoking.

Your doctor may suggest that you attend a cardiac rehab program.

In cardiac rehab, you'll get education and support to help you recover and prevent problems with your heart.

Ask your doctor if rehab is right for you.

And remember that walking is good for you.

Do it as much as your doctor says you can.

It can help you feel better and that will help prevent problems like pneumonia and blood clots.

Follow your doctor's directions on caring for your incision.

And watch for bleeding from that area.

A small amount of blood on the bandage can be normal.

But call your doctor if bright red blood soaks through the bandage.

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Call your doctor if you have problems such as new or worse pain or bleeding, or if you vomit and can't keep fluids down.

Watch for signs of infection such as increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness; red streaks leading from the area; pus draining from the area; or a fever.

Other things to watch for include new or worse shortness of breath or sudden weight gain, or a fast or irregular heartbeat.

Get emergency help right away if you pass out, have severe trouble breathing, have sudden chest pain and shortness of breath, or cough up blood.

You know yourself best, so call your doctor if you have any questions.

Now, this may seem like a lot to do, but all of these things are important.

They can help you feel better, heal, and stay out of the hospital.

And if you're a little nervous right now, that's okay.

Recovery and healing take time.