

Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery Guidelines for Recovery

As your heart and body recover after cardiac surgery, the following are some of the things that you may expect or should be aware of:

FIRST MONTH:

- **Pain**

You may experience pain at your incision sites and muscle soreness in your neck, shoulders, chest, and back. Surgical pain is normal and results from cutting and stretching muscles and tissue during the operation. It can usually be decreased by changing positions, using a heating pad to sore areas, or by pain medication.

- **Angina**

Angina, sometimes called **chest pain**, is your heart's signal that is not getting enough blood and oxygen. It usually increases with activity and decreases with rest. The type of sensation you may have felt with your angina before surgery (e.g. pain, burning, pressure, etc.), and the location of the pain (chest, arms, back, etc.) usually remains the same. Now that you have had bypass surgery, you **are not** expected to have angina, so if you think you could be experiencing angina, call your physician immediately.

- **Shortness of breath**

It is normal to experience some mild shortness of breath. Fluid accumulates in your lungs after surgery, so you must use your spirometer (breathing device) several times a day for the first two weeks to get rid of the fluid. Keep a small, firm pillow handy to brace your chest when you cough. Severe or increasing shortness of breath should be reported to your physician.

- **Swelling in Legs**

If a vein from your leg was used in the surgery, the circulation in that leg will be decreased. This results in pooling of fluid in your legs and feet. The swelling from surgery will usually resolve in 3-4 weeks, and you can speed the process by wearing your elastic hose everyday for the first two weeks, and by elevating your legs and feet while sitting or lying down. Some of the swelling may never completely disappear. You may find that support hose, or buying shoes ½ size larger will be more comfortable.

- **Palpitations**

Short periods of "skipped beats," "rapid heartbeats," or "chest pounding," are common for the first 4-6 weeks after surgery. If they last more than 30 minutes, or are associated with dizziness, contact your physician immediately.

- **Activity**

Gradually increasing your activity will help you regain energy and stamina. Start with short 5-10 minute walks 3 times a day. You may increase to 15-20 minute walks, once or twice a day as your strength returns. (Refer to your "Activities Guidelines" book) No strenuous activities or sports that can cause twisting, such as vacuuming, tennis, or golf.

- **Work**

No work or school during the first month.

- **Lifting**

No lifting more than 10 pounds. This is to allow the sternum (breast bone) to grow back together. This includes lifting grocery bags, laundry baskets, small children, etc. You should also be careful when opening jars or refrigerator doors, as this can put strain on the sternum.

- **Driving**

No driving for the first month. You should have an appointment with your heart surgeon or cardiologist during this month, so check with your physician before you resume driving. Hitting your chest against the steering wheel before your sternum is healed could result in serious injury to your chest or heart.

- **Sex**

No intercourse during the first month. As with some other activities, intercourse causes the heart rate to increase and the heart to work harder. Intimacy and communication are encouraged.

- **Diet**

You may have a poor appetite for the first month. Try to eat foods high in protein to promote healing, but choose foods that are low in fat and high in fiber. Some examples are fish, chicken, beans, and low-fat dairy products. Also attempt to eat six small meals throughout the day instead of three larger meals.

- **Fluids**

It is important to maintain your body fluids while recovering. Unless fluids are limited by your physician, it is recommended that you drink 6-8 glasses of water per day. This will also help to prevent constipation. If you notice increases shortness of breath, or increased swelling in your legs, feet, ankles, or hands, inform your physician.

SECOND MONTH:

- **Pain**

Your pain may actually increase during the second month. Many nerves are cut during surgery, and these nerves begin to regenerate during the first two months. As they do, you may feel tingling, “pins and needles” sensations, or sharp, quick stabbing pains throughout your chest. This can take up to 3-6 months to subside. Gentle stretching exercises can loosen tightness in the muscles and help to reduce soreness.

- **Activity**

You may increase your activity to 20-30 minutes daily of brisk walking, stationary bike, treadmill machine, or swimming with gentle arm strokes.

- **Work**

Your physician may allow sedentary work during the second month, that is, work that requires no physical exertion (e.g. light office work).

- **Lifting**
Restrict lifting to 20 pounds. This includes small children.
- **Driving**
You may resume driving after you have been given the “green light” by your surgeon or cardiologist. But, start slowly. Do not drive in busy traffic. Practice in a parking lot or on a quiet street to become familiar driving again.
- **Sex**
Again, once your physician clears you, you may resume intercourse. One way to test yourself to see if you are ready is to climb two flights of stairs. If you do not become overly fatigued or short of breath, you are probably ready to resume sex.
- **Diet**
Your appetite will return during the second month, and it will be important to follow a low-fat, low-cholesterol, low sodium, if you were not following one prior to surgery. Your physician, nurse or dietitian can help you with making dietary changes.

THIRD MONTH:

- **Pain**
You may still experience some chest soreness, and the numbness and tingling of nerve regeneration.
- **Activity**
You should be ready to resume all or most of your regular activities, with approval of your physician.
- **Work**
You may be able to resume more physical work, with the approval of your physician.
- **Lifting**
There are no restrictions on lifting, as long as you haven’t been told otherwise by your physician. You may begin weight training, but start gradually.

ANSWERS TO SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

How long will the numbness in my chest last?

The numbness can last anywhere from 6 months to 1 year.

Why is one side of my chest much more painful than the other?

If your right or left internal mammary arteries were used for the bypass surgery, you may feel more discomfort on the right or left side of your chest. The surgeons reposition this artery from your chest wall to the blocked artery in your heart. This movement causes more nerves and muscles to be displaced. This can cause more discomfort.

When will my sternum (breast bone) be completely healed?

Everyone heals at different rates, but it usually takes 2-3 months for the sternum to heal completely. Therefore, you should restrict lifting to 10 pounds during the first month, 20 pounds in the second.

Will the wires holding my sternum ever be removed?

The wires DO NOT come out. Once your sternum heals, they are no longer needed. Since it would require another operation to remove them, they remain in place. They will be visible on your chest x-rays, but don't worry-the wires will not set off the metal detectors at the airport.

Now that I've had heart surgery, will I have to continue my heart medications?

If you were taking medications to control your heart or blood pressure before your surgery, you may need to continue taking them after the operation. Some of the medications that your physician has prescribed for you are to control your heart's rhythm. These medications may be discontinued after one month. ***Check with your physician before changing or stopping any medications.***

Why do I feel palpitation?

It is normal to feel a few irregular beats, or palpitations, after heart surgery. Your heart was manipulated during the operation, and this can interrupted its rhythm. As it heals, the rhythm should return to normal, and the irregular beats should stop. If you feel frequent or sustained palpitations, or if they are accompanied by dizziness, shortness of breath, or fatigue, notify your physician immediately.



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