Cardiac Valve 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 paid medication.

  Gentle stretching exercises can loosen the tightness in the muscles and reduce the soreness.

- **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 doctor.

- **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 doctor 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.

  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 doctor before you resume driving.

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Hitting your chest against the steering wheel before your sternum is healed could results 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 food high in protein to promote healing, but choose foods that are low in fat. Some examples are fish, chicken, beans, and low-fat dairy products.

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.

- **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 doctor 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 with driving again.

- **Sex**
  Again, once your doctor clears you, you may resume intercourse. One way to test yourself to see if you are ready is to climb two flights or 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 diet, if you were not following one prior to surgery.

THIRD MONTH:

- **Pain**

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You may still experience some chest soreness, and the numbness and the tingling is nerve regeneration.

- **Activity**

  You should be ready to resume all or most of your regular activities, with approval of your doctor.

- **Work**

  You may be able resume more physical work, with the approval off your doctor.

- **Lifting**

  There are no restrictions on lifting, as long as you haven't been told otherwise by your doctor. You may begin weight training, but start gradually.

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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.

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. 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 may be discontinued after one month. ***Check with your doctor before changing or stopping any medications.***

Why do I feel palpitations?

It is normal to feel a few irregular beats, or palpitations, after heart surgery. Your heart was manipulated during the operation, and this can interrupt 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 doctor immediately.***

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