

After your cardiac surgery

Cardiac Services

Information for Patients

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Recovering at home breast bone

Most people feel nervous when they first return home and realise that they don't have any nurses or doctors around. Your carer may also feel anxious about the responsibility of caring for you. Be kind to yourselves and you will soon settle down. Your confidence will return and grow along with your independence.

General advice

After your operation, it takes about 6 to 8 weeks for the breastbone and chest muscles to heal properly, and up to 12 weeks for the bone to strengthen. The two edges of your breastbone are being held in position by some stainless steel wire; this does not normally need to be taken out. If you have any redness, jabbing pain from the inside of your wound and swelling, you should seek advice from your GP. Whilst your bone is healing it is important that you avoid doing anything that might delay the healing process. You can and should lift your arms above your head; this ensures that your shoulders do not stiffen.

Note: Ladies may find it helpful to wear a bra for support. A soft bra would be most comfortable.

First 6 to 8 weeks

Do not put a large strain on your chest or arms

Do not lift anything heavier than 10lbs/4.5kg when using both hands and 5lbs/2.2kg when using one hand. Make sure the weight is spread evenly through both arms. These weights are the **most** you should lift. If you feel any discomfort you should stop straight away.

- Do not carry bags of shopping or push shopping trolleys.
- Do not pick up babies / toddlers or push prams.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

Avoid any one sided movements, for example:

- ironing
- vacuuming
- straining heavy pans of vegetables
- lifting a full kettle
- mowing the lawn
- gardening
- cleaning the car

Avoid reaching and stretching

You may use your arms to help you balance when getting up from a chair or bed, or when climbing stairs but keep the pressure through your arms to a minimum. Once your chest has healed fully, you can slowly return to heavier activities. Start gently and build up your strength slowly.

You will probably be surprised at how much you are able to do, although you may have to change how you do various activities at first. You may find it useful to take rests between activities. The list below shows which activities you can do safely, if you feel well enough.

You can:

- get yourself up and dressed.
- have a shower. You can have a bath if a bath seat or aid is available, but we recommend showers.
- make your bed as long as you take your time and do it gently. Do not pull the bed out. Do not change bedding.
- go up and down stairs. If you get out of breath, take a break. Take your time, but do not worry, as it is quite normal to feel out of breath until your general fitness improves.
- make yourself a drink.
- make breakfast.
- make a light meal. Take care when opening the fridge / freezer and oven door as they tend to be stiff; use both hands.
- prepare food for the main meal.
- wash or dry dishes (not heavy saucepans).
- dust and polish provided you take your time and do it gently.
- load the washing machine and hang out small items of washing. You will need help to unload the machine and carry the washing to the line.
- go shopping at a quieter time; be careful if pushing heavy doors.
- go to the hairdressers but avoid having your hair washed in a back basin.

Caring for your wound

After your operation, remember it takes about 6 to 8 weeks for the breastbone and chest muscles to heal properly, and up to 12 weeks for the bone to strengthen.

The skin of the chest, arm and some leg wounds are stitched together in layers using dissolvable sutures. Leg wounds may sometimes be closed using clips, which look like staples. These are usually removed 8 to 10 days after surgery. You may notice some redness and tenderness around these clips; this is normal. Leg wounds take 10 to 12 weeks for the skin to close.

You may see some bruising after your surgery; the difference in depth and colour varies from person to person. Some oozing of a little blood or straw coloured fluid is also normal in the early few weeks after surgery.

There are things that you can do to help the wounds to heal:

- Keep yourself and the wound clean. Try not to touch it, and always use a clean towel to gently pat it dry after showering. You can wash as normal but don't use scented soap, perfumes or deodorants on your wound as they may irritate. It is best to use clear running water until your wound is scab free and dry. **Do not** apply any creams, talcum powder or lotions onto the wound as these may irritate and cause your wound to break down. Washing in a salt or antiseptic solution is of no benefit to the surface of the skin. Once your skin has healed (6 to 8 weeks) you can start using your normal toiletries.
- You can help the process by making sure that you eat a balanced diet, including plenty of fruit and vegetables as they contain essential vitamins.
- Take regular exercise, this will get your circulation going and take oxygen to your wound.
- Do not smoke! Each cigarette you smoke reduces the blood supply to the wound, so it is not getting the nutrients it needs to heal.

We would like you or your carer to look at your wounds carefully every day.

If you notice any changes to the wound where the answer to any of the examples below is 'yes', we would like you to contact Ward 31 on 0116 258 3781 or 0116 258 3503:

- is it red?
- is it hot?
- is it swollen?
- is it painful?
- is there fluid leaking from it?

Aches and pains

The operation should have stopped or improved your symptoms. Most people do not get their angina back and so do not need their anti-angina treatments. If you are still having angina, your symptoms should be better controlled. You may find that your medication has changed. You can expect to have aches and pains which come and go for about 3 to 6 months. You may have pain anywhere from your waist to your neck, front and back, and also in your shoulders and arms.

If you had an artery taken from your chest wall to form a bypass graft, you may have a stabbing type of pain, which tends to happen in the same place each time. Take your painkillers regularly

to prevent pain so that you are able to cough, take a deep breath, move around comfortably and exercise. You will know when to start reducing them and when to stop taking them.

If you find your pain is not controlled and you are taking the maximum dose of your pain killing tablets, you should seek advice from your GP. They will review your current tablets and your pain levels. If your pain continues you should return to your GP or contact your local cardiac rehabilitation department (page 10). The longer you are in pain the slower your recovery will be and the more difficult it is for the problem to be brought back under control. So it doesn't pay to be brave!

Sleeping

It will probably take a few weeks to settle back into your normal sleeping pattern. To help, you should:

- go back to your usual bedtime routine.
- take your painkiller before you settle.
- try to sleep on your back for as long as you can (up to six weeks).
- use pillows for support where you need them.

If you are waking in the middle of the night, get up and move around before trying to settle back down again. Take your painkillers if you need them.

Constipation

Unfortunately one of the side effects of taking regular painkillers is difficulty going to the toilet (constipation). It is very important that you don't strain to have a poo whilst on the toilet, as this puts pressure on your heart and wound. Eat a balanced high fibre diet and drink plenty of fluids. If you have not been to the toilet (bowel movement) for a few days (longer than is normal for you), talk to a pharmacist at your local chemist or your GP. It may be that you need some extra help in the form of laxatives or suppositories.

Sexual activity

You can return to your normal sex life. It may take a little time and understanding to overcome your initial fears and anxieties. Remember that your partner is probably as anxious as you are. Try to find a relaxing place, have sexual foreplay to put you in the mood and allow your heart rate and blood pressure to adjust slowly. While your breastbone is healing, it is better to avoid positions which keep your weight on your arms for a long time. You may have to experiment until you find what suits you both, but that can be fun.

Socialising

At first you may only feel like seeing close friends and family, even if you are normally very outgoing. This usually only lasts for a couple of weeks. Remember that visitors can be very tiring especially during the first week or so at home. Try asking them to only stay for a short visit so that you can enjoy their company without getting overtired.

Your carer can go out and leave you alone as you don't need someone with you all the time.

You can get out and about as soon as you feel able. This will vary from person to person. You may find that you get tired easily.

In the first month cigarette smoke will almost certainly make you cough. Try to avoid smoky places. Remember that passive smoking puts you at risk of developing heart disease.

Driving

You will be able to travel as a passenger in a car.

Driving is allowed after 6 weeks, but it may be longer before you feel comfortable and confident behind the steering wheel. Take someone with you for the first few journeys.

Notify your insurance company before you start driving again.

If you are aged 70 years or over, have your licence reviewed by the DVLA every 3 years or if you experience a complicated recovery you should tell the DVLA about your operation.

To make sure you are well enough to drive you **must** be able to:

- see, as the operation can temporarily affect your vision.
- wear a seatbelt comfortably.
- operate the foot controls.
- turn your head to view the back of the vehicle.
- turn the steering wheel quickly if needed.
- concentrate for the length of time you wish to drive.

Whether you are a passenger or a driver you are not exempt from wearing a seat belt. If you find the seatbelt uncomfortable, try using a cushion or a pillow or a rolled towel for padding between you and the seatbelt. In the first few weeks you may need assistance to fasten your seat belt. It is more comfortable to sit in the front of the car.

Getting in and out of the car can be difficult. A plastic bin liner may help you to turn in the seat but don't leave it there as it may make you sweat. Don't be tempted to pull on the car door to help you stand; let your legs do the work and don't put pressure through your arms. You can use the same technique to get out of a chair. We do not recommend you sit in a moving vehicle for more than 1 hour. Make sure you stop regularly on long journeys. You may need to take your pain killers before you start the journey.

Work

Most people who want to return to work are able to do so. The amount of time off you need will depend on the type of job you do. You should talk to your surgeon about this when you come for your check-up. You should also take advice from your GP, occupational health and cardiac rehabilitation department. If you work full-time you may find it helpful to return to work on a part-time basis at first. For example:

- if you have light work - part-time for 8 weeks
- if you have heavy work - part-time for 12 weeks

Dental treatment

Visit your dentist every 6 months for a check-up. You should not have any major dental work in the first 3 months after surgery, however, sometimes it is unavoidable or recommended by your doctors. You will need to take antibiotics prescribed by your dentist.

Heart valve patients

After a valve replacement or repair, there is an increased risk of developing an infection of the heart lining (infective endocarditis). This can be caused by general infections such as a chest or urine infection, or from bacteria entering the bloodstream during dental work or surgical procedures. You must keep your teeth and gums as clean and healthy as possible. Always use a soft toothbrush and change it every month.

You may need antibiotics for any surgery or invasive procedures e.g. dental treatment, operations, catheterisation, insertion of an IUD (intra-uterine contraceptive device). Make sure you tell your dentist or any doctor that you have had a valve replacement. Contact your doctor as soon as possible if you develop any signs of infection e.g. sore throats, coughs, earaches, flu-like symptoms, fever etc. You may need antibiotics straight away.

Do not wait for the infection to clear up on its own.

Holidays

Holidays are fun and they give us something to look forward to. You will probably enjoy your holiday more if you wait until after your check-up with the surgeon.

Air travel should not cause any problems. You can fly 10 days after the operation but it is advisable to wait for 6 weeks. If you wish to take a long haul flight (above 4 hours in the air) you should work very hard at becoming fit before you fly. There is less oxygen available in an aircraft cabin and therefore long journeys can be tiring.

If you are unsure whether you are fit enough to fly, please talk to any of the professionals involved in your care.

To maintain good health during a flight you should drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol to prevent becoming dehydrated. You should move your ankles and legs whilst seated, making sure you move about the cabin whenever you are allowed.

It is important that you have enough medicines to last the trip and that you take them before travelling and throughout the trip. If you go somewhere hot and sunny, remember to protect your scar with a high factor sunblock (factor 50).

Make sure that you have the right health insurance cover. You must tell them that you have had a heart operation to get the correct policy. Most holiday insurances will only cover you 3 months after surgery.

Activity and exercise

You should slowly increase the amount of exercise you take. Regular exercise will help you to become fit again, enable you to return to normal activities. You might be able to take up some new ones that you have been unable to do until now. When you start taking exercise, it is important to build up slowly, work hard, but do not overdo it. You might get tired or slightly short of breath, but you should not feel exhausted. A regular walking programme is an excellent way to get fit.

Walking

When you have been at home for a day, start a walking programme. You must take a daily walk and build up to walking briskly for 30 minutes if you are able. Start your walk slowly and build up your pace after 5 minutes. If you start to feel short of breath, take a short rest and then continue. We expect you to get a little breathless as you need to improve your level of fitness. It will improve over time. You should not feel extremely short of breath. Remember to slow your pace around 5 minutes before you finish your walk. Make sure you wear suitable clothing for the weather and do not carry a heavy bag or handbag. **Do not** walk immediately after a meal and do not walk a dog on a lead, even a small dog can pull.

Go for a walk by yourself after about a week at home, this will help to rebuild your confidence. It is easier for you to walk on level ground, but it will not do you any harm if you have to walk up a small hill. If you walk too far you will not do yourself any harm but you will feel tired.

Recent research has shown brisk walking is one of the best activities for:

- improving and maintaining fitness
- achieving and maintaining an ideal body weight
- helping to reduce blood cholesterol levels

Sport

If you have become fitter after starting a walking programme, you may feel that you would like to begin a new leisure activity. Do not give up exercising if you have an early recovery period. Try to make exercise part of your lifestyle by choosing a type of exercise which you enjoy. Remember that lack of exercise puts you at risk of developing heart disease in the future.

Each person's progress with any activity will be slightly different and may depend on a variety of factors, for example:

- level of fitness before the operation
- progress after the operation
- whether the activity is new to you

Swimming

Do not dive straight into the water. Once your wound is fully healed (8 to 12 weeks), take someone to the pool with you and start by walking into the water, so that the water covers your chest. Try walking across the pool at this depth. Start swimming widths in the shallow end and progress to lengths, swimming from the deep to the shallow end. Use half breaststroke or doggy paddle at first. It may take a few visits to the pool to progress to swimming lengths. Do not overdo it, i.e. leave enough energy to get out of the pool and shower.

Grass bowls

Practice swinging your arm gently in the bowling position from 4 weeks after your operation. You can start playing at 6 weeks after your operation using light woods. Start with short ends and less than 21 points. You can slowly increase to playing with your usual weight woods and to full games over the next few weeks.

Golf

You can walk around the golf course as part of your walking programme. Start putting at 4 weeks after your operation and progress to chipping the ball. Then start to practise your golf swing again, beginning with a half swing and progressing to a full swing. By about 8 weeks after your operation, you should be able to manage a few holes. Slowly build up to playing a whole round again. Take someone with you to begin with, so that they can carry your golf clubs. If you have a trolley, use it. You may need help to get your clubs into and out of the car at first.

Cycling

If you have a static cycle, you may start using this as soon as you get home. Start with short periods, pedalling at a steady pace with low resistance. Slowly increase the time, speed and resistance, but not all three at once. If you are used to cycling, you may start again at 8 weeks after your operation, once your breastbone has healed. If it is a long time since you have ridden a bike, it may be better to wait until about 12 weeks after your operation so that you have had a chance to get a little fitter first from your walking programme. In either case, start somewhere flat if possible and try a short distance first. Progress by increasing the distance and by introducing a few hills to your route.

Fishing

You can start fishing again on discharge from hospital, provided you go with someone else who can cast the rod for you and help with reeling in your catch. You can include a walk along the river bank as part of your daily walking programme. Start practising casting again on dry land after about 6 weeks. You may need help with reeling in your catch for some time, depending on the size of fish you are catching.

Dancing

You can start dancing again as soon as you feel able to after leaving hospital, depending on the type of dancing. For ballroom dancing, you need to be able to support your arms in position; this may not be very comfortable at first. As with all activities, start slowly with short sessions and build up. If you enjoy country dancing, wait until 8 to 12 weeks after your operation, but continue your walking programme in the meantime.

Cardiac rehabilitation

Cardiac rehabilitation programmes take place at all 3 hospitals in Leicester. Classes are also held at Loughborough University and a number of leisure centres. Many of the hospitals which refer patients to us for heart operations also offer cardiac rehabilitation classes. These classes vary slightly but usually offer support, education and for most people, exercise. This helps you to maintain a healthy lifestyle and also improve your fitness and confidence more quickly.

You should be given the relevant information for your local cardiac rehabilitation department by the rehabilitation staff. If you need to contact your local cardiac rehabilitation department the telephone numbers are below. If you take care of yourself for the next few months after this operation and work hard to improve your fitness you will reap the benefits in the future. The health care professionals involved in your care have worked hard to help you but it is you who has to work the hardest to make your operation a success.

Contact details

If you have any problems or questions do not hesitate to ring our cardiac rehabilitation department:

Glenfield Hospital Cardiac Rehabilitation Helpline: 0116 258 3986. Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

Please leave a message and we will call you back within one working day.

Your GP, practice nurse or local cardiac rehabilitation department can give information and advice too.

Useful cardiac rehabilitation numbers:

Leicester General Hospital 0116 258 8069

Derby Royal Hospital 01332 785597

King's Mill Hospital 01623 672296

Queen's Hospital, Burton 01283 593150

Kettering General Hospital 01536 491102

George Eliott Hospital 0247 6865195

Lincolnshire Services:

Boston 01775 652282

Bourne 01778 425124

Lincoln County Hospital 01522 340900 ext 214

Louth County Hospital 01507 605826

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