
Aftercare following your child's open heart surgery over the sternum (sternotomy)

Paediatric Physiotherapy (EMCDHRCA)
Information for Patients

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Introduction

After open heart surgery your child will have a wound over their chest (sternum), they will follow a number of precautions to help the wound heal. These are known as sternal precautions. These will last for 6 weeks unless there is an infection in the wound. If the wound is infected, it will be increased to 8 weeks from the surgery date.

Your therapist will also talk about this advice with you and will be able to answer any questions.

Try not to:

- **Avoid lifting your child underneath the armpits (Figure 1):**

We recommend using a scoop transfer for younger children. This is where 1 hand is placed underneath the bottom and the other hand underneath the head. When helping older children, support them from behind their back to help them into sitting. Your therapy and nursing team are able to show you this.

- **Avoid tummy time for developmental activities:** It is advised to avoid tummy time in the bed or on a mat to avoid pressure on the wound and children pushing through their arms. Instead, you can complete tummy time on a parent's or carer's chest as long as the child is not pushing through their arms.

- **Putting weight through arms: this includes crawling.**

If your child is at the age of crawling, attempt to distract them by trying standing, sitting and other means of play. For older children, avoid pushing through arms to help into standing as pictured below Figure 2.

- **Pulling and pushing with arms:** This includes situations where children are able to climb onto furniture. Providing support under their bottom helps them stand without relying on pulling with their arms. The same applies during play. For older children, no opening heavy doors/carrying heavy objects.

- **Sleeping on their front/chest:** It is advised to put your child to sleep on their back. If they turn over whilst sleeping this is okay, simply turn them back over. Follow safe sleep guidelines.

- **Social environments:** For the first 6 weeks avoid areas where they may pick up infections. This includes play groups and school. You can talk about a returning to school plan with your consultant at the day 10 check-up.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Physical Activity

- Avoid bikes and scooters for 8 weeks.
- Avoid contact sports, gymnastics and trampolining for 12 weeks.
- You will get advice for when to return to non-contact PE. This will be in 6 to 8 weeks after talks with consultant at follow up appointment.

Do

- Continue to go out for walks and get some fresh air.
- Continue to move your child. Do not let them just lie or sit in one position for the whole day.
- Continue to use different equipment to sit in. For example, a car seat, a high chair. Make sure there is a piece of clothing over the scar so the straps are not in direct contact.
- Make sure you continue to use the scoop transfer method shown in figure 3 and 4.
- Encourage your child to move and play as much as possible.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Bathing

- For the first 6 weeks do not get the wound wet by placing it fully in water (submerging).
- You may complete shallow baths (where legs are in the water) whilst keeping the top of the body out of water
- If the wound does get wet simply pat it dry. Do not rub it.
- You may use a shower if the water splashes over the wound and does not soak the wound fully.

Contact details:

Paediatric Physiotherapy Team: **0116 258 5714** (Request Cardiac Physiotherapy Team)

PICU: 0116 258 3288 / 3354 Ward 1: **0116 258 3730 / 3961**

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