Discharge After Open Heart Surgery

Most patients are discharged from the hospital as early as 4 days after heart surgery. It is important to have someone at home to help you during the first few days when you return home from the hospital. Your companion should not be afraid to leave you alone for periods of time.

**When should I make follow up appointments with my doctors?**
You should have at least one follow-up visit with your cardiologist within the **first 2 weeks** after discharge. Schedule an appointment with your referring or local cardiologist and internist as soon as possible after you leave the hospital. You should also schedule a follow-up with your surgeon’s office for 4-6 weeks after surgery.

**What can I expect during my recovery at home?**
Within 4 to 6 days, most patients are eager to leave the hospital. Many people are also concerned about giving up the security of the medical team in the hospital.

Be patient with the pace of your recovery after discharge. Fatigue is normal after a major operation like heart surgery. You shouldn't be surprised to find that one day you feel strong, while the next day you feel tired and weak. Don't get discouraged; your recuperation period will allow the body to heal and increase its strength and endurance.

**Pace Yourself**
A quick change of position (sitting to standing or vice versa) can cause dizziness if it is done too quickly. Rest whenever you get tired. Rest between activities. If you need to rest for more than one hour after an activity, you may be pushing yourself too hard. Do a little less the next day.

Don’t place strain on your chest by sitting in one position for long periods of time. When you are sitting down or standing up, use your leg muscles. Don’t use your arms to lower or raise yourself from your chair. Do not cross your legs – it interferes with blood flow.

**Minimally Invasive Surgery**
This information is applicable to minimally invasive surgery recovery with the exception of lifting. You are not restrained to the 5-10 pound limit. The basic rule of thumb is if it hurts, don’t do it.

**Caring for your incision(s)**
**Shower daily after leaving the hospital.**
- Use warm (not hot) water.
- Wash your incisions gently with soap and water, but do not scrub them.
- Pat your incisions dry.
- Do not take baths or use powders or lotions near the incisions.
- Place a shower-proof chair or stool in the shower with you.
Your incisions may itch or feel sore, tight or numb for a few weeks. Some bruising around the incisions is also normal. You may have white pieces of tape on your chest over the incision. These are called "steri strips". They will gradually fall off. If they have not fallen off after 10 days, gently wash your chest with soap and water and gently peel them off. If you find it more comfortable, a thin layer of gauze may be placed over the incision(s). Women may wish to place cotton or soft material between the bra and chest wall.

Be aware that blood-tinged fluid may leak out from your chest tube drainage sites. If this occurs, place sterile gauze on the site to protect your clothing. Contact your surgeon’s office if this leakage continues for more than 24 hours.

**What do I need to know?**

**Weigh yourself daily.**
Rapid weight gain can be a sign that your heart is not pumping efficiently. Write down your daily weights to keep track of weight loss or weight gain. If you gain more than 2 – 3 pounds in one day or more than 3 – 5 pounds in one week, call your cardiologist.

**Temperature**
If you feel warm or chilled, take your temperature. Call your cardiologist if your temperature exceeds 101° degrees.

**Medications**
Take all medications prescribed by your doctor as directed. Do not change the dosage of your medication without your doctor’s approval. If you are on iron pills, please note that they may cause constipation and make your stools look black. If you had a valve repair or replacement, be sure to tell all your health care providers, including your dentist. You will need to take an antibiotic before having any dental work or other invasive procedures. Future refills will be provided by your local cardiologist.

**Pain Relief**
If your doctor did not prescribe pain medication prior to leaving the hospital, Extra Strength Tylenol™ is an effective painkiller for pain around your incisions or on your chest. If Extra Strength Tylenol™ does not control the pain or the pain becomes more severe or happens more often, call your surgeon or your cardiologist.

**Should I follow a specific diet at home?**
If your doctor recommends a new diet for you, you will receive written information and instruction to help you follow the plan at home.

You may notice that after surgery you have lost your appetite for food or just feel too tired to eat. This is very common, but you need nourishment to enable your body to heal and get stronger. Eat a balanced diet and drink enough fluids. This will help you return to your normal bowel pattern. Do not take laxatives daily unless specifically instructed by your doctor. You may try prune juice or other natural methods.

Eat a variety of foods. You may want to eat 4-5 small meals throughout the day instead of three larger meals. Check labels on food to see what they contain.
Can I exercise?
As you recover from heart surgery, walking is the best form of exercise for you. You should talk with your doctor before taking up more vigorous forms of activity such as swimming or biking.

When you begin a walking routine, pick a time that is convenient and stick to it. Walk on level ground, in a rhythmic and even pace, letting your arms swing at your sides. Wear comfortable walking shoes and dress appropriately for the weather.

Most patients should be capable of walking at least 1-1.5 miles/day one month after surgery. At first, keep activities to about an hour. As you feel stronger, you can go out and do more.

Avoid exercise for up to 1-1/2 hours after eating, and don’t walk outdoors when the temperature or weather makes you uncomfortable. When the weather is severe, walk indoors at a shopping mall or at a health club with an indoor track.

If you begin to feel very tired, short of breath or dizzy, rest immediately and reduce the distance you walk the next day. If you have chest pain, nausea or vomiting, headache or pain in your jaws, teeth, arms or ears, or any symptom similar to your previous angina, contact your doctor immediately. Do not resume walking unless your physician approves.

Activities to try
Crafts, painting, knitting, cards or table games, walks with friends, shopping, movies or sporting events

Activities to avoid
Swimming, driving, golfing or other strenuous activities

What can I lift after surgery?
When you first arrive home from the hospital, you may find even the smallest items hard to lift without straining your chest. Here are several practical suggestions to make lifting easier:

- Avoid heavy lifting, such as full suitcases, wet laundry or full grocery bags.
- For small objects on a table or countertop, first pull them close to you and lift with both hands.
- Use the weight of your whole body to open heavy doors or to push shopping carts and vacuum cleaners. These activities should be avoided when you first arrive home.
- Use a step stool to reach high places, don’t stretch and strain.
- Bend at the knees – not from the waist – when lifting from the ground.

When can I drive after surgery?
To protect your breastbone from injury, do not drive until your doctor gives his approval (about 3-6 weeks after surgery). For safety, wear shoulder and seat belts when traveling in a car.
Is it normal to feel down or depressed after heart surgery?
Depression may affect you in many ways throughout your recovery. You may eat too much or too little. You may oversleep or not be able to sleep. You may find yourself crying for no reason. You may feel angry or depressed. You may also have a lack of interest in daily activities such as visiting with a friend or reading. Try to talk openly about your feelings with your friends and family. Stick to a regular daily routine. If symptoms are severe, or you have them for 2 or more weeks, call your doctor.

Word finding capacity and math skills may be decreased for a period of time.

How soon after surgery can I have sex?
Resume sexual activity as soon as you and your partner are comfortable. Until your sternum has healed to its full strength (about 6 weeks), take the bottom position or a side by side position. Many myths surround sex after heart disease. The most common one is that resuming sex often brings on a heart attack, stroke or sudden death. This is not true. There's no reason why a heart patient can't resume usual sexual activity as soon as he/she feels ready to do so. Talk with your doctor if you have any concerns.

Fear about performance and general depression are two psychological factors that can greatly reduce sexual interest and capacity. After recovery, heart patients may feel depressed. This depression is normal, and in 85 percent of the cases it disappears within three months. Choose a time when you are rested, relaxed and free from the stressful feelings brought on by the day's schedules and responsibilities. Wait one to three hours after eating a full meal so that digestion can take place. Select a familiar, peaceful setting that is free from interruptions.

When do I need to call my doctor?
If you have any of the following symptoms, you must let your doctor know:

- Chills, or fever above 101° degrees.
- A severe headache.
- Drainage or bad odor from an incision.
- Increased swelling, redness or bruising in or around the incisions.
- Fainting or loss of consciousness.
- Pain not relieved by pain medication.
- Blood in urine or stool.

- Fluttering in the chest or a rapid heart rate (palpitations).
- Shortness of breath that does not go away with rest.
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.
- Chest pain similar to what you had before your surgery.
- Marked swelling of legs, ankles and/or feet.

This information is brief and general. It should not be the only source of your information on this health care topic. It is not to be used or relied on for diagnosis or treatment. It does not take the place of instructions from your doctor. Talk to your health care providers before making a health care decision.

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Openhrt/reading level 6.5 10/02. Revised 8-06 RL 7.1SAM.