

Cardiothoracic Unit

Advice following your sternotomy

During the operation an incision is made in your chest dividing the chest bone to enable the surgeon to operate. Afterwards this bone is wired together. These wires stay in place and can be forgotten.

Your chest bone will take about 12 weeks to heal. As it does so, the red scar will shrink in time to a thin white line. You may notice a slight bump at the top of your chest wound. This should gradually disappear.

You will find you can do more around the house if you use both hands to lift, push or pull objects. This will keep the pressure on both sides of the broken bone equal and you will have less pain.

Reintroduce activities gradually and as you feel able to. Use any pain in your chest and how tired you feel as a guide.

Wound Care and Healing

You will be referred to a community/GP nurse if you have a dressing on your wound when you go home.

If you do not have a dressing on your wound, please keep it clean by having a wash or shower daily.

Please avoid using perfumed soaps, creams or powder on your wound as these can cause irritation.

Contact your GP if your wound becomes red, swollen, and painful or starts to weep.

Pain

It is normal to experience aches, pains, stiffness and numbness in your back, neck, shoulders, arms and chest after your operation. This is because of the effect of the operation on your muscles and ligaments, and also due to your wound healing this will improve.



Patient Information

- Try holding a clean pillow or towel against your chest when you cough.
- Keep your shoulder joints mobile.
- Some people find that applying heat or a cold pack helps.
- For women, wearing a soft lightweight bra may help during the early days following surgery.
- Use painkillers regularly so that you can move, sleep and cough comfortably. Some people do not like to take painkillers until the pain is really bad. When pain is bad it is not easy to control. So, it is better to prevent pain by taking pain killers regularly. If the pain killers do not work well enough, talk to your GP to find out what else may help.

Anti-Embollic Stockings

The anti-embolic stockings that are given in hospital are used to help prevent blood clots in your deep leg veins, commonly called a deep vein thrombosis, or DVT. These stockings gently squeeze your legs and feet to increase the blood flow in your leg veins. This reduces the risk of clot formation.

- When resting, sit with your legs up. This helps with circulation and prevents your legs and ankles from swelling.
- Wear them for four weeks after discharge.
- Get someone to help you put them on, to avoid unnecessary discomfort to your leg and chest wounds
- They are easier to put on if a little talcum powder is put on the foot and leg first
- Ensure all wrinkles are smoothed out to avoid uneven pressure
- Remember do not cross your legs when sitting as the pressure put on the areas behind your knee decreases the blood flow in the legs
- If you suffer with a condition that affects the circulation in your legs, you will not be issued with any stockings.

Activity and Exercise

Keeping active is important following your surgery and walking is the best activity. You may find the amount of activity you can manage varies from day to day.

It is best to exercise little and often for the first 1-2 weeks after your surgery. Begin by walking around your home and taking short walks outside.

Patient Information

Build up slowly over 6 weeks to a 30 minute walk each day.

Always wait for at least 1 hour after eating before you exercise, and plan your exercise into your day, so you do not do too much and tire yourself out.

You must avoid heavy lifting pushing and pulling for at least 8 weeks, you can then gradually increase the amounts lifted. This means you should not be carrying heavy bags, saucepans, lifting young children, vacuuming, ironing, digging or mowing the lawn.

When possible, use both hands to lift an object (to split the load) and carry the item close to your body.

If you usually walk a dog on a lead, you will need to ask someone to accompany you to do this in the first 8 weeks.

Driving and Air Travel

Do not drive until you have seen your consultant at your outpatient appointment. Inform the DVLA if you have a HGV or PSV licence. Always inform your insurance company – your insurance may have to be altered and may not be valid immediately after chest surgery. Make sure you can safely steer and use the brakes before you start driving again. You must wear a seatbelt when you resume driving or travelling as a car passenger. You can make this more comfortable by using a small pillow or towel between your chest and seatbelt.

Leave flying for at least until after your first post-operative outpatient appointment. If it is imperative that you fly before this appointment, please check with your consultant's office. You must inform your travel insurance company. During long journeys take regular opportunities to walk and stretch your legs. Wear your support stockings.

Your love life

Whenever you feel ready, make yourself feel comfortable and please be aware your sternum is healing in the first six and eight weeks. Before starting/restarting Viagra or the contraceptive pill you should consult your GP or consultant.

Returning to Work

If you are of working age, returning to work will help to make your life feel more like normal. If you have a manual/physical job then you will need to refrain from work for 12 weeks. It may be worth finding out if you can return to part-time work to start with, and build up slowly.

If you have any questions or concerns about getting back to work, speak to your doctor or rehabilitation nurse. Your local re-employment officer is another good source of help.

Financial Help

If you need help in finding out about financial benefits, call Job Centre Plus on 0845 602 0265, who will be able to help you. If you live outside Coventry, this department can give you details of your local service.

If you require any further advice regarding your recovery, please contact Cardiac Liaison Team on **024 7696 5803**.

The trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 5803 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

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