

# **Patients Guide to Recovery After Chest Surgery**

## **How you may feel after your surgery**

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You may feel tired for several weeks after your surgery. Plan your activities so that you can get adequate rest.

You may have a poor appetite for several weeks and food may not have its normal taste and appeal.

All of these feelings are normal and should go away. If these feelings persist, please tell your surgeon.

## **Care of your incisions**

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Your procedure may involve more than one incision. Diagnostic procedures may only involve a small incision; other procedures may require a long incision. Both may include a small incision and suture where the chest tube was removed.

Some incisions can be closed with sutures that are beneath the skin and dissolve over time. Other incisions may have stitches or staples that will be removed during your postoperative appointment.

Look at all incisions every day. Use a mirror if you need to. Redness, swelling, drainage, or increased pain may indicate infection. Please call our office immediately if you have any of these signs.

You may remove the thin paper Steri-Strips that may be over your incision after 7 days. Occasionally these strips may fall off on their own. There is no need to replace them if this should happen.

## **Treating your pain**

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You may experience pain at the incision site for a number of weeks after surgery. You have been given a prescription for pain medication; please take it as needed. Bigger incisions tend to be more painful. Holding a pillow firmly over your incision when coughing may be helpful.

It is important to have an adequate level of pain control so that you may continue your coughing and deep breathing exercises and walking. Plan to take your pain medication as ordered. Do not wait until the pain becomes severe.

Constipation is a very common side effect of pain medicine. Take a stool softener like Colace, drink plenty of fluids, and eat foods high in fiber to help prevent constipation. Take a mild laxative (such as Milk of Magnesia) if you go more than 24 hours without moving your bowels.

## **Resuming your activities following surgery**

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Most people feel very tired when they leave the hospital. Even when you are told you can resume normal activities, you may not feel up to it. It is best to pace yourself as you return to your usual daily routine.

- Taking a bath or shower**      Avoid tub baths for 2 weeks so that your incision(s) can heal completely. You may shower every day. You may gently wash with antibacterial, fragrance-free, liquid soap to take away dried material from around the incision. Be sure to dry the incision completely by gently patting instead of rubbing.
- Deep Breathing/Coughing**      Continue to perform your coughing and deep breathing exercises and incentive spirometer at least 4 times a day to help keep your lungs clear. Take 3-4 deep breaths followed by a forceful cough. Try to schedule your pain medication about ½ hour before doing this. Holding a pillow against your incision will help reduce the discomfort.
- Walking**      Try to stay as active as you can. Use your pain medication regularly so you can move around comfortably. Continue to take daily walks gradually increasing the length of time to 20-30 minutes per walk, 2-3 times a day. Be sure to rest between activities. Avoid prolonged sitting.
- Lifting**      Avoid heavy lifting (more than 10 lbs), shoveling, vacuuming, and lifting small children for at least 6 weeks. You may do light housework if you feel up to it sooner.
- Sleep**      Try to get a full night of sleep each night. A daily nap for a limited time may be helpful as well. It is important to get back into a daily routine as soon as possible. It is acceptable to sleep on your back, either side including the operated side, or on your stomach.
- Sexual Activity**      You may resume sexual activity when you feel comfortable.
- Driving**      Do not drive until you have completely stopped taking narcotic pain medicine and no longer have pain from your incision, weakness, or fatigue.

**Returning to work**

If you feel up to it, you may generally plan to return to work 4-6 weeks after surgery depending on the reason for your surgery and the type of work you do. Be sure to discuss this with your surgeon during your postoperative follow-up visit.

**Travel**

Be sure to discuss your travel plans with your surgeon after surgery. Typically, by 2 weeks after surgery you should be able to fly.

**Medication**

Please resume your medications that you were taking prior to surgery unless instructed otherwise by your surgeon.