

Your Recovery After Sternotomy Surgery

This handout offers information on how to manage your recovery when you go home after sternotomy surgery. It is important for you and your family member/partner-in-care to read this handout.

Recovery from sternotomy surgery means your breastbone (sternum) is healing and you are slowly getting your strength back. Recovery and healing can take months. Everyone recovers at a different pace. You need to protect your sternum while it is healing.

Activity rules for 2 to 3 months after surgery

To protect your sternum:

- **Do not** lift anything over 10 lbs or 4.5 kg (examples: grocery bags, backpacks, cat litter/pet food bags, or children).
- **Do not** push or pull anything with your arms (examples: heavy doors/sliding doors, chairs, furniture, or handrails).
- **Do not** let another person pull on your arms.
- **Do not** push down on a walker or cane when walking.
- **Do not** use your arms to pull yourself up into a vehicle such as a transit bus, train, truck, or SUV.
- **Do not** reach your arms behind your back (examples: reach for the arms of a chair or to clean yourself). It may help to use a long-handled reacher or grabber aid.
- **Do not** do any heavy house or yard work (examples: vacuuming, mopping floors, lawn mowing, or raking). You may do light house or yard work chores such as:
 - ✓ Washing dishes
 - ✓ Folding clothes
 - ✓ Trimming flowers
- **Do not** do any strenuous exercises or activities (examples: running, biking, push-ups, lifting weights, high intensity workouts, golf, tennis, or other similar sports).

How to move and rest while you heal

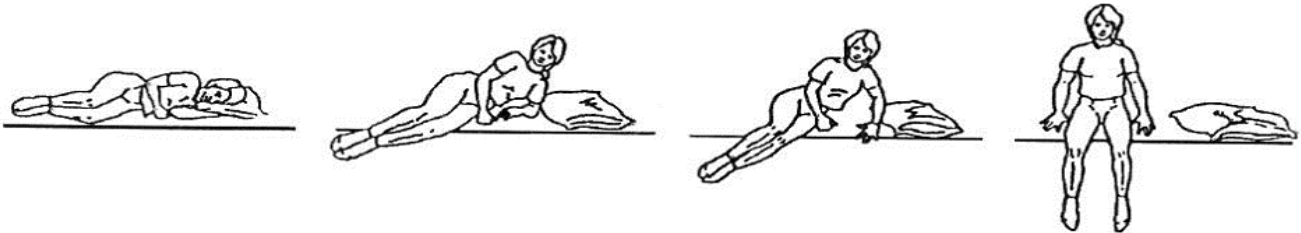
- Walk every day. Start with short walks. Walk a little more each day. Walking improves blood flow and helps prevent problems like pneumonia or constipation.
- Rest when you feel tired. Sleep helps your body heal.
- Try to sleep on your back while your sternum heals.
- Hold a pillow over your chest area when you cough, sneeze, or take deep breaths. This helps you support your chest to reduce strain and any discomfort or pain.

- Most people need to take time off work for about 4 to 12 weeks. This depends on your job and how you feel. Ask your surgeon how this applies to you.
- Light social activities are okay (examples: going to a movie, a restaurant, or visiting with family or friends).
- Do not drive or ride in the front seat of a vehicle where there is an airbag until your doctor says it is safe.

Safe movement techniques

Getting out of bed

1. Lie on your side. Bend your knees.
2. Use your elbow close to your body to help you sit up while lowering your legs.
3. Move to the edge of the bed. Place your feet on the floor.
4. Rest for a moment, then stand up using your legs. Do not push up with your arms/hands.



Getting into bed

1. Stand with the bed touching the back of your legs.
2. Sit down on the edge of the bed.
3. Move your buttocks back on the bed without using your arms.
4. Use your elbow close to your body to lie on your side and lift your legs onto the bed.

Getting up from a chair

1. Move forward to the edge of the chair by pushing your shoulders against the back of the chair.
2. Bring your feet in so your toes are under your knees.
3. Lean forward until your nose is over your toes.
4. Use your legs to stand. You may rock gently once or twice if needed.
5. Do not push or pull with your arms. Use them only for balance.

Sitting down in a chair

1. Stand with the back of your legs touching the chair.
2. Sit down without pushing or pulling with your arms.
3. Use your legs to move into a comfortable sitting position.

Activity beginning at 3 to 4 months after surgery

When your healthcare team says it is safe, you may:

- Slowly return to the activities and exercises you did before surgery. Continue walking.
- Do heavy housework (examples: vacuuming or mopping).
- Do yard work (examples: mowing the lawn or raking).
- Travel for work or leisure.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any information in this handout.

You can call the nurse navigator at your thoracic surgeon's office from Monday to Friday from 8 am to 4 pm – except on holidays.

- Dr. Browne at 905-576-8711 or 1-866-338-1778 at extension 32383
- Dr. Dickie at 905-576-8711 or 1-866-338-1778 at extension 36357
- Dr. Sisson at 905-576-8711 or 1-866-338-1778 at extension 36342
- Dr. Trainor at 905-576-8711 or 1-866-338-1778 extension 34481

This handout was adapted by the Patient Education Program at the Durham Regional Cancer Centre from an Alberta Health Services handout titled: "Sternotomy Precautions: What to Expect at Home" under a Creative Commons license. It was last reviewed in March 2026.