

Leaving Hospital After Heart Surgery

Your Information Guide

**Cardiothoracic Surgical Unit
Royal Prince Alfred Hospital**

This guide is to assist you with some of the problems you may experience when you go home from hospital.



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Contents

Chest Incision (operation site)	3
Pain	3
Itchiness	4
Numbness	4
Shoulder & Neck Exercises	4
Leg Incision (operation site)	5
Sleeping	6
Breathing Problems	6
Bowel Problems	7
Tiredness	8
Nausea (feeling sick)	8
Depression	9
Sex after your operation	9
Rehabilitation Programs	10
Stay in Touch	10

Chest Incision (Operation Site)

Pain

Some patients have some pain in their chest near the wound for weeks to months after the operation. This sometimes happens when you sneeze or cough or do arm exercises, or even when you are trying to get to sleep. If this happens to you, take your pain tablets.

Pain Relief

When you go home keep taking your pain tablets as discussed with you by your nurse before you left hospital.

To help you manage your pain effectively, it is important to remember that:

- The strongest pain tablet is Panadeine Forte. The next strongest is Panadeine and the least strongest is Panadol.
- These can be taken every 4-5 hours if you need them.
- Depending on your pain levels, you might find that Panadeine Forte is best used morning and night time for extra pain relief, and Panadeine or Panadol every 4-5 hours throughout the day is enough to keep you comfortable.

If you are worried about your pain call your local doctor or the Case Manager for Cardiac Surgery on (02) 9515 8735.

Itchiness

- It is common for your chest wound to be itchy while it is healing.
- Do not scratch your chest wound as scratching can cause infection and your wound will take longer to heal.
- When your chest wound is healed, you can put Vitamin E Cream or Sorbelene Cream on the skin to relieve the itchiness.
- We advise that you don't use these creams for the first 2-3 weeks after your operation because they could cause infection.

Numbness

- It is common to experience some numbness around the operation wound areas.
- This happens with any surgery.
- Sometimes the feeling returns and sometimes it doesn't.
- Fortunately nothing needs to be done about the numbness. Some small nerves to the skin had to be cut to do your operation.

Shoulder and Neck Exercises

Remember to do the shoulder and neck exercises that you were shown by your physiotherapist when you were in hospital. Doing your exercises daily will assist your recovery.

Leg incision (Operation Site)

Sore Ankles

- The ankle wound is the slowest to heal, and it is often the sorest part of the wound. This will improve as your wound gets better.
- It is very important that you do your leg, ankle and walking exercises, because these exercises help you to reduce your pain. It is also common for your ankles and feet to swell after your operation.
- Your legs can ooze for up to a week after you go home. If you notice any redness, or signs of infection see your local doctor.

Things that you can do to reduce the swelling in your ankles and feet:

- Put your feet up when you sit down.
- Do not sit in the one position for too long. Make sure you get up for a short walk, for example when you are watching TV or when you go on long car trips.

If you are concerned about any swelling in your ankles and feet, see your local doctor.

Hints to help you get a good night's sleep

- Sometimes taking a warm shower and then your pain tablets just before you go to sleep will make you more comfortable.
- If you sleep on your side use pillows behind your back for support. This will help your muscles relax and it will be easier for you to go to sleep.
- Avoid stimulants such as tea, coffee and Coca Cola before going to sleep.
- Try herbal beverages such as Chamomile Tea, which can be calming and soothing.

Breathing Problems

Shortness of Breath

It is common for people who have had an operation like yours to get some shortness of breath, or feel puffed out when they exert themselves.

- To make you feel better follow your walking program as you were shown while you were in hospital.
- Keep doing your breathing and coughing exercises as shown to you by the Physiotherapist.
- Your shortness of breath should gradually decrease as you become more active and you'll start to feel better.
- Do not over do your exercise.

Call your local doctor if your shortness of breath does not improve when you rest or lie down.

Bowel Problems

Constipation is common after any operation. You can relieve constipation by:

- Eating foods such as cereals that are high in fibre, for example 'All Bran', 'Sultana Bran', 'Just Right', Untoasted Muesli; and
- fresh fruit and vegetables, and
- eating wholemeal bread; dried fruit and legumes such as baked beans; soya beans or lentils.
- drinking 6-8 glasses of water a day, and/or
- taking Metamucil as directed on the label or Coloxyl with Senna at night, or whatever is prescribed by your doctor.

Remember pain relief tablets such as Panadeine Forte do cause constipation, so take Metamucil or Coloxyl with Senna to ensure you open your bowels.

Tiredness

Tiredness is common after an operation but it is still very important to do your exercises. To help you feel less tired;

- take a nap whenever you feel you need one,
- make sure you get a good nights sleep, and
- do something that helps you to relax, such as listening to your favourite music or a relaxation tape. This will help you to feel less tired.

Nausea (feeling sick)

You may feel sick or lose your appetite. This often happens after an operation such as the one you have had. Pain tablets, antibiotics or stress may be the cause of your sickness. To stop you from feeling sick:

- Eat small meal frequently, such as cereals for breakfast then toast for morning tea; a sandwich for lunch; then yoghurt or fruit for afternoon tea.
- Don't eat fatty or rich foods.
- Remember to drink water throughout the day.
- If you can't eat try a liquid substitute such as Sustagen.
- If you do continue to feel sick ask your local doctor to review the tablets that you are taking.

Depression

- It is common to feel depressed after an operation like the one you have been through, for example feeling sad, unmotivated or 'down'.
- Sometimes you may feel anxious, bored or impatient which can also lead to you feeling down and depressed.
- If you do feel down, remind yourself that these feelings are normal, and will pass as you start to get better.
- Some people have trouble remembering some things after their operation. If this happens to you, it is important to know that it is not a lasting problem and that your memory will improve as you get better.

Sex after your operation

Many people worry about having sex after their operation. Having sex is as safe for your heart as doing light exercise. You can resume sexual intercourse 6-8 weeks after your operation.

If you are worried that your heart can't cope with having sex, do this quick test.

- Walk up two flights of stairs and if you don't feel short of breath, and if you don't have chest pain, then your heart can cope with having sex.

It's a good idea to wait at least 3 hours after drinking alcohol, or eating a big meal before you have sex, and if some positions are uncomfortable, try new positions, and try not to rest on your hands.

Rehabilitation Programs

Most hospitals offer rehabilitation programs for people who have had heart surgery.

At these programs the rehabilitation co-ordinator, nurses and physiotherapists provide a combination of supervised exercise, education and individual counselling, as well as information about taking up a healthier lifestyle to reduce your risk of further heart problems.

You were given information about Rehabilitation Programs when you were in hospital. We do encourage that you attend. For more information call our Rehabilitation Co-ordinator on (02) 0515 6290.

Stay in Touch

If you are worried about anything to do with your recovery, call your local doctor, or you can call Royal Prince Alfred's Hospital Case Manager for Cardiac Surgery on (02) 9515 8735.