



# Going home after heart surgery

Cardiothoracic Care Centre



**ST VINCENT'S  
HOSPITAL**  
MELBOURNE

A FACILITY OF ST VINCENT'S HEALTH AUSTRALIA

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# Introduction

The information in this booklet will help you to recover after your operation.

It includes tips on

- how to care for your wounds
- pain and medication management
- lifestyle changes
- looking after yourself when you go home
- physical activity
- diet.

Please take the time to read it, or go through it with your family.

It may take between 3 and 6 months to recover completely from your operation. This will depend on your level of fitness and general health before the operation.

## Quick Tip

Go to all follow up appointments and the cardiac rehabilitation program. This will help you to recover. You will also learn tips for staying well.



## Follow up appointments

You will need to make an **appointment with your GP**. This should be within 3–5 days of leaving hospital. Use this appointment to ask your GP questions and get prescriptions. You may also need to have a blood test. The hospital will send your GP a discharge letter. This letter will give your GP information on your treatment and recovery.

You will need to see the **cardiologist** and **surgeon** after you go home. Talk to staff about making these appointments before you leave hospital.

You should normally see the cardiologist 4 weeks after leaving hospital. You should normally see the surgeon 6 weeks after leaving hospital.

These appointments are to check you are recovering well. Your cardiologist and surgeon will check your wounds. They might make changes to your medications. It is also an opportunity for you to ask questions and discuss your progress.

You are encouraged to attend a **cardiac rehabilitation program**. This usually starts 4–6 weeks after your operation. The physiotherapist will give you information on the program before you leave hospital.

## Record your appointments here

GP: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Cardiologist: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Surgeon: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Cardiac rehabilitation program

Venue: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

## When to seek medical advice

You should go to your GP or local hospital if you experience any of the following:

- increasing ankle swelling and/or increasing shortness of breath
- palpitations or an irregular heartbeat and dizziness
- pain that feels like the angina you may have experienced before the operation
- wound pain that is getting worse
- wounds that become red, swollen, inflamed, begin to ooze or start to open
- high body temperature or fever
- coughs and colds that don't go away.

You can contact the nurse in charge at the cardiac ward (4 East) on **03 9231 4621** if you have any questions.

## Simple rules for the first six weeks after your operation

- Take good care of your breast bone.
- Do not do anything that places more stress on one side of your chest than the other eg: carrying shopping bag in one hand.
- Walking is the most simple and effective exercise.
- No driving or cycling.
- No recreational activities like bowls, fishing, golf or swimming.
- No walking the dog on a lead.
- No lifting toddlers or small children. It's ok to have them placed on your lap for a cuddle.
- Follow the lifting guide on p 10 of this booklet.
- Protect your wounds with light clothing when you are in the sun.

## Make sensible lifestyle choices

- No smoking.
- Limit alcohol consumption.
- Make healthy diet choices.
- Make sure you get plenty of rest and good sleep.

## Emotional wellbeing

It is normal to feel different emotions after heart surgery. These may include: sadness, tearfulness, anxiety, anger and frustration. You may also experience tiredness, sleep disturbances, trouble with your concentration and memory, visual disturbances, loss of appetite and altered taste sensations.

It will take time to adjust. These emotions and feelings usually do not last long. You will experience good days and bad days. Everything should improve over the next six weeks.

### Getting back to normal daily activity can help.

- Try to get up, have a wash and get into your day clothes each day.
- It's ok to help with light routines around the house such as making tea or toast.
- Go outside for a walk a couple of times each day. Try to increase the amount of walking you do over time.
- Try to have a short rest in the afternoon for the first month after your operation. Aim for less than an hour. Resting for longer may make it hard to sleep at night.
- Eat a well-balanced diet. Try small servings regularly to improve your appetite.
- See your friends. You may need to limit visitors so you don't become too tired.
- Talk over your feelings and progress with your loved ones.
- Be sensible and listen to your body.

Some patients experience **depression** after a heart operation. If you find your mood remains low and it is difficult to get going, talk to your GP sooner rather than later.

Try not to make any major life changing decisions within the first 3 months after your operation, eg: writing a will or selling your house.

Often patients progress through surgery and recovery with an increased sense of wellness and vitality.

## Pain management

It is common to experience pain in your wounds after your operation. The pain you feel will most likely be caused by inflammation, muscular aches and nerve pain. It should not be like the angina pain you may have experienced before your operation.

Normally people do more once they get home than they did in hospital. You may find your pain is worse in your first few days at home. It is important to continue your exercise routine as this will help you to move your joints and contribute to your overall wellness.

Pain is normally worse in the morning (after sleeping in the same position) and at night time. **Continue taking your paracetamol for 3 to 4 weeks** after going home. Begin to reduce your paracetamol, as pain allows. For example, stop your lunch time dose and then your dinner time doses first. The last doses to be stopped should be your morning and night time paracetamol.

If you were sent home with **stronger pain-relief medication**, you should take this as prescribed. Your local doctor will be sent information in your discharge summary about decreasing and stopping these medications.

Continue to use your **“teddy”** (rolled up towel or small cushion), to support and cushion your chest when coughing and sneezing. You can also use it underneath your passenger seat belt for comfort.

It is recommended that women wear a sports bra (not underwire) during the day and night until the wound has healed properly. If you notice discomfort or rubbing of the wound, ask your nurse for some clean gauze to place between your wound and your bra.





## Medication

You will notice that your medications will be different from what you were taking before your operation. Before you go home from hospital, the pharmacist or nurse will go through your new medications in detail. They will discuss each medication, when and how often it needs to be taken, what it is for, and side effects. You will receive a few days worth of medication until you can see your GP.

Most patients are sent home with aspirin, medication to lower cholesterol, blood pressure medication, water tablets (diuretics) and pain medications. Aspirin and cholesterol medication are usually taken for the rest of your life.

If you are planning a trip or holiday, please ensure you have enough of your medications for the duration of your stay.

It is really important that medication is kept in its original packaging and only used as directed. Do not use other medications including herbal remedies unless discussed with your GP. Also, it is important not to stop taking any of your medications without talking with your GP, surgeon or cardiologist. Please store your medications safely and out of reach of children.

### What if I am constipated?

Unfortunately, many pain-relief medications can make you constipated. The best remedy is to eat high-fibre foods such as bran, fruit, and vegetables, and follow your exercise program. Exercise will help promote regularity. The pharmacist may also give you laxatives to help prevent constipation.

### Important

If your wounds become redder, or if they start to swell, ooze or become more painful, visit your GP immediately.

### Warfarin

If you have been given Warfarin (a medicine to thin your blood), you will have extra instructions from the pharmacist on how to manage this including:

- where and how often to have your blood tested
- getting your INR results
- dosages
- diet changes
- drug interactions.

While taking Warfarin you will bruise more easily if you hurt yourself. If you cut yourself you will have to apply pressure for longer as you will bleed more easily. It is important not to have a wet shave. Use an electric razor instead.

Do not stop taking Warfarin unless advised by your doctor.

When planning a holiday or trip away from home, please make sure you have found somewhere nearby to have your blood test taken. Further information and advice will be in your warfarin education booklet.



## Wound care

It is important to **check your wounds** after leaving hospital. Wounds, including chest, leg and forearm wounds will heal and scab over in the next 2 weeks. They may be a little itchy, but do not scratch them. The scab will gradually fall away and the scar will begin to fade over the next few months.

When showering, do not point the water directly onto your wounds. There is no need to use soap on your wounds. Pat your wounds dry, rather than rubbing them. Wash and dry your wounds first. If possible use a fresh flannel and towel each time you shower. Do not use creams, talcum powder, lotions, or soapy water on your wounds until they have fully healed.

You should not soak in the bath or go to the swimming pool until your wounds are completely healed. Try not to touch your wounds unless you need to. Always wash your hands before touching your wounds.

Put your legs up on a stool when you are sitting down. This will reduce swelling. It will also help your leg wounds to heal more quickly. Wear your TED stockings for six weeks after the operation. This is important on long car journeys. It can help prevent swelling.

You might be visited by a nursing service after you go home. It is important to follow their instructions.

If you have **staples** in your wounds, you will need to see your GP to have these removed. Most stitches are dissolvable. In some cases, you may also have stitches that your GP will need to remove. This will be explained to you before you go home from hospital.

## Sexual activity

It is normal to feel a little anxious and nervous about having sex after your operation. Sexual intercourse requires about the same energy as it does to walk approximately 1km or walk up 2 flights of stairs. If you are having difficulty with these, becoming short of breath, or too tired, please wait before resuming sexual activity.

During the initial six weeks after surgery, try positions that place less stress on your breastbone and arms to avoid pain in your chest wound.

Anxiety and some medications may interfere with performance. Please speak with your doctor if this is the case.

## Diabetes advice

If you have diabetes, it is incredibly important that you achieve **good control of your blood sugars** after your operation. Controlling your diabetes will help with your wound healing. Once you get back to your normal food at home and regain your appetite, continue to monitor your blood sugars closely. Your GP or endocrinologist can help you with this.

## Returning to work

This decision is usually made after your 4–6 week check up with your surgeon or cardiologist. It will depend on your type of work, how demanding your job is, your strength and other factors. Office workers can usually return to work within 4–6 weeks. If your job involves driving, you will not be allowed to go back to work until 6 weeks after your operation. If your work involves heavy lifting you should follow your surgeon's advice.

## Important things to know after heart valve surgery

- It is very important to tell any doctors or dentists that you have had heart valve surgery before having another procedure.
- If you are going to have **tattoos or piercings** anywhere on your body, please talk to your GP first. You might need to take antibiotics.
- Follow up with your GP straight away if you have concerns about your wounds.
- You should see your GP if you have ongoing coughs colds or fevers.
- You should have 6 monthly follow-up appointments with your **dentist**. Good dental care and hygiene is important after heart surgery. You may need antibiotics before having dental treatment.
- If you wear glasses and your eyesight has changed after your operation, wait 3 months before changing your prescription.
- If you have had a **metal valve** inserted, you may notice the 'ticking' sound it makes. You will notice this less as time goes by.

## Exercise and physical activity

Exercise needs to be part of your daily routine. Walking is the best exercise for your recovery. Not exercising can increase your risk of heart disease.

### Benefits of regular exercise include:

- improved blood supply to the heart
- reduced risk of more heart problems
- reduced blood pressure
- improved cholesterol
- weight control

- improved long term health
- reduced anxiety and stress
- stronger bones and lower risk of osteoporosis
- better control of blood glucose levels if you have diabetes
- it feels good.

### What activities should I do?

The National Heart Foundation recommends that you do 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity (such as brisk walking) every day. You don't have to do the 30 minutes all at once. You can break it up into 3 x 10 minute sessions a day.

### National Heart Foundation Guidelines for walking after leaving hospital:

Week	Minimum time (minutes)	Times per day	Pace
1	5–10	2	Stroll
2	10–15	2	Comfortable
3	15–20	2	Comfortable
4	20–25	1–2	Comfortable/Stride out
5	25–30	1–2	Comfortable/Stride out
6	30+	1–2	Comfortable/Stride out

## Safety tips

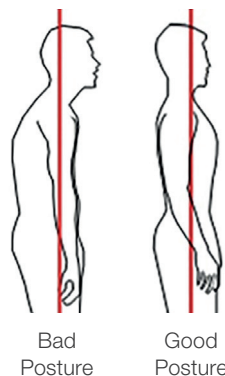
Your chest bone is cut during heart surgery. It takes 6–8 weeks for the bone to be firm. It will take 3 months for it to be fully healed. Follow these tips to exercise safely.

- Start any activity at a low intensity and slowly increase over several weeks.
- When walking, you should be able to talk in sentences.
- Avoid exercise when you are feeling unwell, tired or sore from previous activities.
- Don't over exert yourself.
- Avoid exercise straight after meals or alcohol.
- Drink water to replace the amount of sweat lost through exercising.
- Stop if you feel dizzy, palpitations, excessive sweating, severe tiredness, chest pain or severe shortness of breath.
- Once you're home, you may start doing light household chores such as laundry, cooking, dusting and washing dishes if you feel able to.

## How to lift safely

- While in hospital, it is advised that you don't lift anything heavier than **1kg**. This can increase by 1kg per week until you reach 5kg in the first 6 weeks.
- When lifting, always bend your knees, not your back.
- Use both hands to pick up objects.
- Keep objects close to your body.

## Posture awareness



### Do:

- Stand tall.
- Keep chin tucked in.
- Keep head and shoulders in alignment.
- Check posture regularly in the mirror.
- Pull head back against headrest in car seat.

### Don't:

- Slouch or slump.
- Stay in one position for too long.

## Important

Do not lift, push or pull objects heavier than 5kg in the first six weeks.

## Helpful tips

- Sleep on your side with a pillow between your knees.
- To get out of bed, roll onto your side. Hang your legs over the edge of the bed. Push yourself into a seated position using both arms.
- Women may prefer a front fastening bra with wide straps.

## Guidelines for resuming normal activities

Activity	Time	Example
Personal care	2–3 days after operation	Shower, dressing, going to toilet.
Cooking	Immediately	Easy meals.
Housework	Immediately light tasks, 6 weeks heavy tasks	Light: dishes, dusting, hand wash. Heavy: Vacuuming, scrubbing bathroom.
Shopping	2 weeks	Use a shopping trolley. Don't carry heavy bags.
Gardening	Immediately light tasks, 6 weeks heavy tasks	Light: watering plants with hose, light weeding. Heavy: mowing lawn, shovel or wheelbarrow use.
Sexual activity	Whenever comfortable	If you can climb 2 flights of stairs without pain or shortness of breath, you should have enough energy for sex. Avoid supporting weight directly through arms or chest in first six weeks. If you can't find comfortable positions, wait until chest bone has healed.
Driving	6 weeks	Try to have someone else in the car at first.
Swimming	6 weeks once wound healed	Breast stroke only. Freestyle and backstroke after 3 months.
Bowls	4–6 weeks	Don't lift anything heavier than 5kg for the first 6 weeks.
Golf	3 weeks	Putting only. Full golf swing – wait 3 months.
Work	Sedentary – 6 weeks Moderate – 8 weeks Heavy – 12 weeks	Gradually return to normal hours and duties. Heavy: discuss with your GP or surgeon.

## The Four P's to conserving your energy

### Prioritise your activities

Make a list of the everyday tasks and activities that you do. Plan to do the most important jobs first before you run out of time and energy.

To help you do this, select a day of the week and look at your daily routine. Write down a list of activities to be done. Then ask yourself the following questions:

- Which must I do?
- Which would I like to do?
- Which can others do for me?
- Which can I eliminate?
- Which are exhausting or time-wasting habits?

If a task isn't getting done day after day because of its low priority, perhaps it is not important and should be eliminated from your list!

### Plan before doing a task

Try to do as much planning as possible. Planning your time and your surrounding environment can really help you to conserve your energy levels.

Consider these tips when you next carry out an activity:

- Learn when you have the most energy during the day and plan your activities accordingly.
  - Don't pack too much into one day.
  - Gather all necessary equipment before doing a job.
  - Alternate active jobs with gentler, slower ones.
  - Try to allow time for rest between periods of work.
  - Avoid leaving things to the last minute.
  - Think about breaking jobs down into smaller stages and plan short breaks between them.
- Tip: A good way of doing this is to create your own time planner. Write down all activities for each day, week and month. Write down your active times in red, and the rest times in blue. This will help you to balance rest and activity.*

## Position your body when performing activities

Over time, poor posture can lead to joint fatigue and sometimes pain, as well as affecting your breathing and co-ordination.

You should avoid the following positions, where possible:

- Bending down to the ground (e.g. to put shoes/socks on or to pick things up from the floor)
- Reaching up (e.g. into high cupboards for objects)
- Pushing/pulling objects or strenuous gripping.

When doing activities such as lifting an object from the floor, try to:

- keep your head straight
- avoid twisting your upper body
- position your feet at shoulder distance apart
- maintain the natural curve of your back
- bend at the hips and knees not at the waist

*Tip: While lifting or carrying, keep the object close to the body. This uses less energy and reduces the risk of back injury.*

## Pace yourself when doing activities

Pacing yourself is key to conserving energy.

Ask yourself:

- Do I try to do too much at once and then need to take a long rest because I feel so worn out?  
*Tip: take regular short breaks during prolonged periods of activity, for example, a five-minute rest for every 20 minutes of work.*
- Do I try to start work again and find I am unable to continue for very long before needing another rest?  
*Tip: allocate time limits to specific tasks.*
- Do I never seem to get anything done?  
*Tip: Allow enough time to do things so you don't have to rush.*

Most importantly – know your limitations! Instead of continuing to do an activity to the point of exhaustion, time take a break before you get tired.



## Daily stretches

Complete the following stretches 1–2 times daily. Do this for 6 weeks after the operation until you are moving your shoulders well and your posture has improved. Repeat each exercise 5 times.

**Side neck bend**



**Seated reach to floor**



**Active neck rotation**



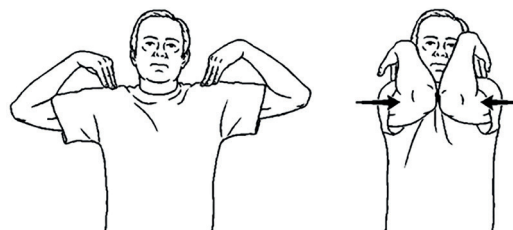
**Trunk rotation**



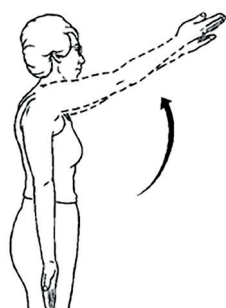
**Shoulder rolls (Reverse rotation)**



**Hands to shoulder then elbows together**



**Shoulder raise with extended arms**



**Side bend**



## Cardiac rehabilitation

After open heart surgery, it is important that you and your family are able to return to an active and satisfying lifestyle.

You are encouraged to attend cardiac rehabilitation (rehab) to help you recover. This will help you return to an active lifestyle. It can also help to prevent future heart problems.

Cardiac rehab aims to:

- maximise your physical, psychological and social recovery
- help you make lifestyle changes to reduce your risk of future heart problems
- help you become physically active to a level that matches your ability to exercise.

Before you leave hospital, your physiotherapist will organise for you to attend a cardiac rehabilitation program near your home. You should start the program 4–6 weeks after your operation. You will be contacted by phone with an appointment in the first couple of weeks after you go home.

## Diet

What you eat and drink is very important. The wrong foods or drinks can lead to high blood fats (cholesterol), high blood pressure, diabetes and being overweight. All of these factors can increase your risk of heart disease.

You can start enjoying a healthy balanced diet today by following these tips:

- Make grains, fruits and vegetables the main part of each meal. These foods are a good source of fibre, vitamins and minerals. They are also low in salt and fat which can help reduce your risk of heart disease.
- Include five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day.
- Choose wholegrain breads and breakfast cereals, pasta, noodles and rice.
- Try to include legumes and pulses in at least two meals a week. Legumes and pulses include canned beans (e.g. baked beans, kidney beans and three bean mix), dried peas (e.g. split peas), dried beans (e.g. butter beans and broad beans), chickpeas or lentils.
- Eat lean meats and poultry, oily fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds.
- Choose reduced or low fat milk, yoghurt, cheese.
- Use small amounts of vegetable or seed oils.
- Drink plenty of water.

## Choose healthier fats and oils

- Fats are an important part of a healthy balanced diet. You should not avoid them completely.
- The **type** of fats you include in your diet is important.

## Tips to include healthy fats in your diet

- Use spreads and margarines made from canola, sunflower or olive oil instead of butter. You can use other foods, such as avocado or hummus instead of spreads and margarines two to three times a week.
- Use salad dressings and mayonnaise made from canola, sunflower, soybean, olive, sesame and peanut oils.
- Eat two to three serves of oily fish a week. A serving size of fish is 150 grams or approximately the size of your whole hand.
- Select lean meat and poultry (meat trimmed of all visible fat and chicken without skin).
- Try to limit processed meats (e.g. sausages) and deli meats (e.g. ham or salami).
- Try to limit sugary, fatty and salty take-away meals and snacks to once a week. These might include pastries, pies, pizza, fried fish, hamburgers, hot chips and creamy pasta dishes.
- Healthier take-away choices include sushi or sashimi, Asian stir-fries, tomato-based pasta dishes, grilled fish, chicken and lean meat.

- Use reduced, low or no fat milk, yoghurt, custard and desserts.
- Include small portions of cheese (one to two slices or 20 to 40 grams) up to four times a week. Lower fat cheeses such as light tasty cheddar, ricotta, cottage and light mozzarella, are healthier choices.
- It is ok to include eggs as part of a healthy balanced diet. You can eat a serve of two eggs a few times a week.

## Salt

- Avoid adding salt during cooking.
- Do not add salt to the food on your plate.
- Try adding flavour with herbs and spices instead of salt.
- Choose 'reduced salt' or 'no added salt' foods.
- Read labels and look for lower sodium options (aim for no more than 120–400mg sodium (salt) per 100g).
- Eat less take-away food.

## Snacks

- If you need to snack between meals, choose fresh fruit, raw vegetables with hummus, unsalted nuts (one handful or 30g), seeds and reduced fat dairy products instead of cake, biscuits or crisps.
- Other choices can be rice cakes and non-confectionery bars, such plain nut bars, seed bars and cereal bars that have earned the Heart Foundation Tick.
- Try to limit sugary, fatty and salty snack foods such as crisps, cakes, pastries, biscuits, lollies and chocolate to once a week.

## Drinks

- Drink mainly water.
- Limit foods and drinks containing added sugars such as lollies, sugar-sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, energy and sports drinks.
- Drink coffee (regular or decaffeinated) and tea in moderation.
- If you use milk, choose reduced, low or no fat milk.
- *If you choose to drink alcohol, limit intake.* Current recommendations for men and women: No more than 2 standard drinks a day on average. Everyone should include 1–2 alcohol free days per week.
- A small glass (200ml) of fruit or vegetable juice can be consumed occasionally, but should not replace water.

## The important Tick

When you shop, look for the Heart Foundation Tick.

The Tick is the Heart Foundation's guide to help you make healthier food choices quickly and easily. Foods with the Tick are healthier choices among the foods of their type. In general, Tick approved foods are relatively lower in fat, salt and added sugar, and higher in dietary fibre.

For more information on food and diet:

- ask your nurse to contact the dietitian
- call St Vincent's Hospital Nutrition Department on **9231 3755** to make an appointment, or
- visit Dietitians Association of Australia website, [daa.asn.com.au](http://daa.asn.com.au) to find an Accredited Practising Dietitian near you.

Heartline, the Heart Foundation's national telephone information service can also provide further information on **1300 36 27 87** or alternatively, visit **[www.heartfoundation.com.au](http://www.heartfoundation.com.au)**.

## Useful websites

### National Heart Foundation

[www.heartfoundation.com.au](http://www.heartfoundation.com.au)

### Diabetes Australia

[www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)

### Beyond Blue – Depression and Anxiety

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

## References

### National Heart Foundation

[www.heartfoundation.com.au](http://www.heartfoundation.com.au)

[www.heartonline.org.au](http://www.heartonline.org.au)

### British Heart Foundation

[www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)

### University of Southern California

[www.cts.usc.edu/index.html](http://www.cts.usc.edu/index.html)

A patient's guide to heart surgery

## Contact details

### **St Vincent's Cardiac Ward (4 East)**

Nurse Unit Manager

Tel: 03 9231 4621

### **St Vincent's Physiotherapy Department**

Tel: 03 9231 3805

### **St Vincent's Nutrition Department**

Tel: 03 9231 3755



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