

Cardiac Surgery Sternal Precautions

During surgery, your surgeon will break your middle breastbone (called the **sternum**) to access your heart. After your heart is repaired, your surgeon will use wires to hold your sternum together. These wires will stay in for the rest of your life.

As you recover, following the precautions in this pamphlet will lower the stress put on your sternum and give you the best chance to have it heal properly.

Precautions

- You may use your arms to help yourself move **as long as it does not cause more pain. If you have more pain, stop right away.**
 - › Let pain be your guide.
- **When using your arms:**
 - › **Do not** reach behind your back **with both arms at the same time.** Otherwise you can move your arms around freely. It is OK to reach with 1 arm at a time. You can feed yourself, wash your hair and body, brush your teeth, or wipe yourself after using the washroom.
- **Hug your pillow when you cough or sneeze.** Coughing and sneezing create a lot of pressure from inside your body. Supporting your sternum from the outside will help to lower any discomfort and/or pain.
- There are **3 ways to lower the stress** on your sternum **when you lift, push, or pull** with your arms. Follow these precautions at least for the first few weeks.
 1. **Keep your elbows against your body.** This prevents your arms from acting as levers. It is much harder to lift something with your arms stretched out than it is with them close to your body. This lowers the stress on your sternum.
 2. **Try to use both of your arms and/or hands at the same time.** This helps spread the load and evens out the force coming from both sides of your sternum. Pushing with only 1 arm creates a bigger difference between the right side and the left side of the sternum.
 3. **Move slowly.** Moving fast creates more force and raises the risk of hurting your sternum. If you move slowly and you start to feel pain, it gives you time to stop before hurting your sternum.

- **When you feel ready (after a few weeks), slowly progress to using your arms normally at your own pace. Let pain be your guide.** If you do something that hurts, go back to the pain-free way you were doing it before. We suggest progressing in this order:
 1. Start by using both of your arms away from your body to lift something that weighs 5 to 10 pounds (like a milk container), moving slowly.
 2. Then try lifting it using only 1 arm, moving slowly.
 3. Over time, try to move faster and lift heavier objects.

Remember:

1. It is OK to use your arms **if it does not hurt**.
 2. You are free to move your arms around, just avoid reaching behind your back with both arms at the same time.
 3. Hug your pillow when you cough and/or sneeze.
 4. Keep your elbows close to your body when pushing, pulling, or lifting.
 5. Use both arms and/or hands when pushing, pulling, or lifting.
 6. Move slowly.
 7. Progress to using your arms normally at your own pace. Let pain be your guide.
- There is no timeline for using Sternal Precautions. You can expect to be back to using your arms as usual after 4 weeks (1 month) as long as:
 - › You are progressing at your own pace, with pain as your guide
 - › You no longer feel pain
 - and
 - › You do not have any complications (like an infection or clicking)
 - **If you have diabetes**, your sternum may take longer to heal because diabetes can slow the healing process.

Driving

- After 4 weeks, if you are back to using your arms normally again without any pain, you will be able to go back to driving. **Do not** drive if:
 - › You still have pain
 - or
 - › You are not using your arms normally again

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This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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