

Frequently Asked Questions About Cardiac Surgery

Patients often forget to ask their surgeon questions after they learn they will be having surgery. The below questions are the most frequently asked questions of our Heart Team. If you have additional questions not listed here, please call our office so we can get those answers for you.

Providence Heart Clinic Cardiovascular Surgery – 503-216-8670

How do I care for my incisions?

It is important to check your incision daily to monitor for any signs and/or symptoms of infection. If these develop, please call the office.

- If you see redness that moves out from the incision
- If the incision becomes warm or hot to touch
- If the incision develops drainage or oozing
- If you have pain at the incision site (more than tenderness)

Your incisions will develop scabbing that will stay in place up to 4 weeks post-surgery. The scabbing will come off as your incision heals.

- Do not use any lotions, ointments, creams, or oils on the incisions until the scabbing is completely gone.
- It is important to keep the incisions dry and clean.
- You will not be able to soak in a bathtub or hot tub until cleared by the surgeon or physician assistant.

Why Do I Have a Sore Throat?

Your throat may feel sore from bruising caused by the tube that was in your throat during the operation. Some medicines that were used as a part of your operation may dry your throat, which can cause soreness or a dry cough. This should go away within a few days after your surgery. On some occasions it may persist for a few weeks.

Does My Appetite Change After Surgery?

Many times after surgery, your appetite temporarily changes and your taste may also be affected. Foods may taste bland, or overly salty or sweet. Food may even have a metallic taste. This can last up to 3 weeks post-surgery.

We recommend eating 5-6 times a day with smaller portion sizes. This can help to prevent the feeling of nausea and being bloated after surgery. If you are struggling with food, it is ok to supplement with protein shakes, drinks, or smoothies to help add calories and protein to the diet.

Why Am I So Fatigued? Does My Sleep Pattern Change After Surgery?

Following an operation, your body works hard to recover and repair itself, so it is normal to feel tired. This feeling may come on quickly and it is important to get rest when you need it. This feeling won't last forever but is part of the recovery process. Remember to limit your activities and not take on too much. Follow the saying "little and often is a good idea".

For some individuals, their sleep cycle temporarily changes. You may notice you can sleep for 2-3 hours at a time and then find it difficult to go back to sleep. Or you may need to take naps during the day. Initially, you will be sleeping on your back for a period time to protect the incision and your sternum. Sleeping flat on your back may be uncomfortable. Some people feel a pressure sensation in their chest. We recommend you sleep with your head elevated to relieve the sensation. Try using a lot of pillows for comfort or try using a wedge pillow to provide support to your upper back, neck, and head.

It is ok to sleep in a recliner as needed until you can return to your bed. In time, your sleep cycle should return to normal. On a short-term basis, your surgeon may allow you to take melatonin or Benadryl to help with sleep after surgery.

I Feel Like My Thinking is Cloudy, and I Have Been Much More Emotional. Is This Normal?

It is normal to feel a bit groggy and slow when you first wake up following surgery. As the anesthetic continues to wear off, you will start to feel clearer. On occasion people have post-op delirium. This condition affects one out of four people who have had surgery. A few days following surgery, and a person may feel confused, emotional, irritable, angry or tearful. Sometimes sleep is affected and patients experience vivid dreams. Other times, a patient may not remember the names of their loved ones. While this is upsetting, these affects will clear over time.

Delirium can be caused by several issues, including infection, low oxygen levels or dehydration.

Is it Normal to Have Shortness of Breath After Surgery?

It can be normal for you to experience shortness of breath after surgery. This is due to your lungs recovering from the surgery and needing to fully expand. Your incentive spirometer allows you to take deep breaths to help expand your lungs. Following discharge from the hospital, you will be using the incentive spirometer 2-3 times a day. The shortness of breath can last up to 4 weeks after surgery and will decrease as you increase your walking and activity. If you are having increased shortness of breath that is affecting the amount of activity you are able to do, or the shortness of breath occurs at rest, please call our office right away.

Why Do I have Tingling in My Fingers?

Tingling in your fingers or numbness may happen if a nerve gets stretched by an instrument that your surgeon was using during your operation. This may also be related to the position your arm is in during surgery. Symptoms will usually get better in a few days. On rare occasion this may last a few weeks to three months. Sometimes as the nerves begin to recover, a person may experience a stabbing, shocking or electrical-type pain. If this gets severe or does not go away, please contact the clinic as further evaluation may be needed.

Is it Normal to Have Vision Changes After Surgery?

Some people find they have blurry vision after the operation and see dots or flashing lights. This is only temporary. However, it's best not to have an eye test for three months after your surgery, so your eyes have time to settle.

Could I Have Back Pain After Surgery?

It is not uncommon to experience back pain after heart surgery. This is due to the position of your muscles and back during the surgery. The muscles may become tight, feel tense, and have spasms that come and go. The muscle discomfort is more common in the upper back, shoulders, and neck area, however it can occur in the lower back. It will take time for the muscles to relax on their own as you increase your walking and activities through recovery.

Try these relief ideas:

- Use a heating pad on your back as needed
- Try over-the-counter creams, ointments, or patches (ex. Icyhot, Bengay, Aspercreme, etc).
- Have someone do a light massage on your back to help alleviate the back discomfort.

I Feel My Heart Pounding, Is This Normal?

During your operation, your surgeon opened the sac around your heart called the pericardium. The thickness of the pericardium is equal to about 3 sheets of paper and is left open at the end of your operation. Because of this, you may be able to hear your heart beat more clearly than before the operation. This will go away in time.

When Can I Take a Shower After Surgery?

You can take a shower the day you arrive home. We recommend that until you become stronger, you have someone nearby and use a shower chair. Let the water flow towards your back to protect your incisions. You can place soap on your shoulders and allow the water to run down the front of the chest. Please do not use a washcloth on your chest or incision. Once you have completed your shower, pat the area dry with a towel.

How Will My Pain Be Managed After Surgery?

After your surgery, we will be starting you on Tylenol 500 mg 2 tablets every 8 hours. It takes time for the Tylenol to build up in your system and recommend you continue the Tylenol consistently once you are discharged home. It is common to continue the Tylenol for the first 2 weeks at home to help with pain control as you increase your walking and daily activities. If Tylenol is not enough to relieve your pain, our first choice of an opioid is Oxycodone. If you cannot tolerate or have an allergy to Oxycodone, we will work on finding another option to help with your pain management. It is important to have good pain control so you can increase your activities post-surgery to help with your recovery.

What Type of Exercise Can I Do After Surgery?

Due to the need to protect your sternum, the only exercising you will be able to do initially is walking. Once you are discharged home, we want you to walk 3-4 times a day with a minimum of 5 minutes per walk. You can gradually increase the amount of time you walk if you are not having any pain or discomfort in the sternum, any increased shortness of breath, or fatigue. During your recovery, it is important to increase the walking to help improve your shortness of breath and exercise tolerance.

How Long Will I be Out of Work After My Surgery?

At the 1 month follow up visit after surgery, we will discuss with you about returning to work. Usually, you can return to work with light duty 6-8 weeks after surgery. If you have a job where you will be lifting heavy items or not able to return with light duty, you should be able to return in 3 months.

When Can I Start to Drive After Surgery?

You should be able to start driving 3 weeks from the day of discharge from the hospital. There are times that you might have to wait longer per the surgeon's recommendation.

We recommend that once you start to drive:

- Do small/short driving trips to start
- Take notice of where the seatbelt crosses on the chest. To protect the incision, use a small pillow or washcloth to place in between the seatbelt and incision.
- Do not pull/lift yourself into a tall truck or SUV. This can cause pressure on the sternum.
- You can gradually increase the amount of driving time as tolerated.

What is Cardiac Rehabilitation and When Would I Start?

Cardiac Rehab is a customized monitored exercise and education program, designed to assist cardiac patients in recovery from their cardiac event. We place a referral for cardiac rehab on the day you are discharged from the hospital. You will start cardiac rehab at least 5-6 weeks post-surgery. Most insurance companies will cover 36 sessions of cardiac rehab and you would go twice a week. During the first visit for cardiac rehab, the staff will be asking questions to determine where you are in your recovery. After the first visit you will start to exercise while the staff monitors your heart rhythm and vital signs. Cardiac rehab can help you increase your exercise and endurance while you recover from your surgery.

Please call our office if you have additional questions not answered here.

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