



# How Can I Recover From Heart Surgery?

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## What should I expect immediately after heart surgery?

Immediately after your operation, you'll be taken to an intensive care unit (ICU) or recovery room. A nurse will be with you at all times, and special equipment will be used to monitor your progress.

- Some people wake up an hour or two after surgery, but most take longer. If you can hear or open your eyes before you can move your arms or legs, don't worry. Your mind and body will soon be fully coordinated.
- You'll have a breathing tube in your mouth. It may be uncomfortable, and you won't be able to talk. It's usually removed within 24 hours.
- It's normal to have tubes and wires attached to your body. They help staff check your vital signs, take blood, give drugs and fluids, and drain body fluids.
- At first, bandages or paper tape dressings will cover your incision. The bandages will be removed a day or so later.
- You'll feel sore but probably not severe pain. If you have severe pain, the nurse will give you medicine if you ask.

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## When can my family visit?

Your family members may visit briefly within 45 minutes or an hour after your operation. They shouldn't expect you to respond.

Later visits must be arranged to fit the rules of the ICU.

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## What should I expect from the rest of my hospital stay?

Several things will help you recover, including:

- Getting out of bed. First, just move in bed. In a day or two, sit in a chair and walk with help. Usually activity increases daily.
- Respiratory therapy to eliminate fluids that collect in your lungs during and after heart surgery. Taking deep breaths and coughing may hurt, but won't harm your incision.
- Water, fluids and food. Most people drink the day after their operation. You'll get regular foods as soon as you can tolerate them. Salt is often restricted.
- Elastic stockings. These will help blood circulate through the leg veins while you're not very active.
- A bath or shower usually within three to four days after your operation. The nurse should be close by during your first shower or bath.
- If external stitches or staples were used to close your incision, they'll usually be removed in seven to 10 days.
- Expect to feel better and stronger every day. It's normal to get tired easily and have emotional ups and downs.

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## What should I do after I go home?

Try to get back into a normal sleeping and waking routine as soon as you can. Get up at a reasonable hour, shower and get dressed. Rest in mid-morning and take a nap in the afternoon.

Take a short walk or ride a stationary bicycle every day, and do a little more every day. Try to feel pleasantly tired at bedtime; it'll help you sleep. Taking pain medicine for a few days may make it easier to sleep. You'll probably tire easily for the first three weeks after the operation. But about three to six weeks after surgery, you'll begin to feel better and have more strength.

Take your temperature with a thermometer at 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. daily for two or three weeks. Tell your doctor if your temperature is above 100° F (38° C.).

Weigh yourself every day on a bathroom scale. Expect a little weight loss for about three weeks. If you gain more than five pounds, tell your doctor. You may be retaining fluid, which can be dangerous.

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## Is there anything I should NOT do?

- Don't drive a car until you feel strong and well; wait a few weeks. Don't try unless you're sure you can drive safely.
- Don't push, pull or lift anything weighing more than 10 pounds. Wait for at least six to eight weeks to give your breastbone time to heal.

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## How can I learn more?

1. Talk to your doctor, nurse or other health-care professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It's very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.
2. Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit [americanheart.org](http://americanheart.org) to learn more about heart disease.

3. For information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit [StrokeAssociation.org](http://StrokeAssociation.org).

We have many other fact sheets and educational booklets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one.

Knowledge is power, so *Learn and Live!*

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## Do you have questions or comments for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

What kind of physical activity would be good for me?  
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How can I know what my weight should be?  
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What's the most important change I can make?  
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