

Returning to fitness after heart surgery

A patient's guide

Increasing activity

After your operation, your heart function should be improved and so your ability to exercise will also be improved. However, because of your heart disease you may have been unable to exercise for months or even years, so your increase in activity needs to be done gradually.

One of the best ways to exercise and increase your fitness after your operation is by walking. You can start this as soon as you get home.

When you begin, take two short walks a day starting with the distance you have been walking in the hospital (with your physiotherapist).

Gradually increase the distance and pace of your walking. As the distance increases, you will be able to take one longer walk instead of two.

You should walk at a pace that makes you slightly short of breath. If you get excessively short of breath as you walk (unable to walk and hold a conversation) you are probably overdoing the distance or the pace a little.

Most people are able to walk between one and two miles within six to eight weeks of the operation, but this is only a guide as everyone's rate of progress varies. Your physiotherapist will discuss this with you prior to your discharge.

If you have access to a stationary bike, you can use this to improve your fitness by increasing the length of time on the bike rather than the resistance.

If at any time you are worried by your level of shortness of breath or your exercise progress in general, do ask your GP, or Consultant at your next outpatient visit or call the Cardiac Support telephone line at Papworth.

Flexibility exercises

As well as improving your overall fitness, you will find that you benefit from doing a few simple stretches each day to increase your flexibility. These exercises target your chest and shoulder region which can be stiff and uncomfortable after your operation.

1. Sitting down on an upright, firm chair, stretch first one arm as far above your head as you can. Try and push gently up towards the ceiling and then lower it again, repeat with the other arm. Repeat slowly four or five times.
2. Sit down on an upright, firm chair. Keeping hips and feet facing straight forwards, turn your head and trunk as far as you can comfortably go, first to the right and then to the left. Repeat this slowly four or five times.

3. Standing up, feet slightly apart and hands by your sides, slowly slide your left hand down towards your left knee, so that you bend from the waist, (try not to twist your body as you do this exercise). Repeat with the right hand down to the right knee. You should feel a gentle and comfortable stretch down the side of the chest, no more than this. Repeat this slowly four or five times.

These stretches should not be painful. Stretch to a point of comfort and hold this for a few seconds, do not bounce. Continue to do these exercises two or three times a day for as long as you feel your chest is limited in movement.

Chest wound healing

As you regain fitness and get back to normal over the first two to three months after your operation, plan how to build some regular exercise into your lifestyle. Exercising five times a week for at least twenty minutes will help strengthen your heart and improve your overall fitness.

Following cardiac surgery it is natural to experience new aches, pains and stiffness in your chest, back and neck areas as bruising appears and your bone heals (this should not resemble angina pain). It is therefore important that before starting any exercise programme you realise that although your skin may have healed your breast bone will take 12 weeks to heal fully.

To protect your breast bone during this time **AVOID** heavy lifting, pulling or pushing, eg, lifting children, vacuuming, mowing the lawn, digging, pushing supermarket trolleys, carrying shopping etc.

The muscles in your chest will also take time to settle down, so it is important not to do any heavy arm activity in the first 12 weeks to avoid any delay in the healing process.

At first you may find it easier to sleep lying on your back. You can lie on your side when you can do so comfortably. Remember not to use your arms to move into side lying.

To help in your goal for improved fitness here is an approximate guide to when you can start/resume various sports.

Post-op

Bowls	8 weeks
Dancing	8 weeks
Swimming	10-12 weeks
Road cycling	10-12 weeks
Racket sports	12 weeks
Fishing	12 weeks
Golf	Wait 12 weeks before starting the full 'swing'. You can walk the course and putt from 4-6 weeks.
Driving	You may resume driving 4-6 weeks after surgery, providing you get clearance from your doctor.
Sexual activity	This can be resumed when you feel ready as long as you are not weight bearing through your arms to support yourself.

If you have any other interests or concerns please discuss them with your physiotherapist prior to your discharge home.

Remember - Action makes the heart grow stronger

You may be offered cardiac rehabilitation; this will depend upon your physical condition and the availability of programmes in your area at the time. Your physiotherapist will advise you on the programmes available.

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