

## Returning home / fitness

When you return home continue your walking programme as discussed with your physiotherapist.

Normally start by:

- taking a twice daily walk of 5 minutes
- increase the time by 2-3 minutes every other day
- aim to be walking 30 minutes a day by week 4-6 after surgery

## Exercise progression

You can start light sports / gym work / gardening 10-12 weeks after the operation but take care at first and lift with both hands. For specific sports / heavy activity please discuss with your consultant.

## Driving

Legally you are allowed to drive 4 weeks after surgery; however, we recommend 6 weeks to allow time for your breastbone to fully heal. It is a good idea to inform your insurance company following major surgery so you do not invalidate your insurance policy.

## Back to work

Discuss with your consultant when it is suitable for you to return to work. This may depend on the type of job you have, but light work can commence 6-8 weeks after surgery.



This leaflet is available in large print and other formats and languages.

Please contact:  
Physiotherapy Dept.  
Cardiothoracic team  
Derriford Hospital  
Plymouth  
PL6 8DH

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



**HEARTSWELL**  
YOUR LOCAL HEART CHARITY

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Plymouth Hospitals **NHS**  
NHS Trust



## Physiotherapy advice for patients undergoing heart surgery

**Physiotherapy Dept.**  
Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust  
Derriford Road  
Crownhill  
Plymouth  
PL6 8DH

Tel: 01752 202082  
[www.plymouthhospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.plymouthhospitals.nhs.uk)



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## Introduction

Physiotherapy is an essential part of recovery following your operation. There are three main areas of Physiotherapy involvement:

- Chest care
- Mobility
- Returning home / fitness

## Chest care

There are many factors associated with heart surgery which can lead to chest complications. These can occur regardless of whether you have an existing chest condition or a smoking history.

- Anaesthesia can increase the amount of phlegm produced and make it thicker and stickier. It can temporarily reduce the strength of your cough.
- During the operation your lungs may be partially deflated and it may take time for your lung function to return to normal.
- Discomfort from your wound or drains can limit your ability to take a deep breath or cough.
- Smoking or recent coughs/colds can increase the amount of phlegm produced after the operation.
- Reduced activity levels following your operation can lead to shallow breathing. This will make clearing your phlegm more difficult and may cause complications with your breathing.

## Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises help to expand your lungs and remove secretions after surgery.

It is very important that you practice these regularly as phlegm on your chest may lead to a chest infection.

Before starting breathing exercises ensure that:

- your pain is well controlled i.e. you can take a deep breath without feeling too uncomfortable. Contact your nurse if you still have pain.
- make sure you are sitting comfortably in an upright position.

Start the exercises by practising normal relaxed breathing. Place your hands on your abdomen, you should feel it rise and fall gently. Then:

- take a long slow deep breath in through your nose (if able). Hold this for 2-3 seconds, sniff in, then gently breathe out like a sigh. Repeat twice more.
- then take 2 supported huffs (breathing out through an open mouth and throat by contracting your tummy muscles as if steaming up a mirror) and then cough whilst supporting your breast bone if you have any phlegm to clear.
- after clearing phlegm, return to relaxed breathing and repeat if you feel you have more phlegm to clear.

## Mobility

You will be helped out of bed on the first day with a member of staff and perhaps even start your walking program. The aim is to walk the length of the corridor soon after you arrive on the ward. You will be

encouraged to progress your walking with the aim to mobilise 4 lengths prior to discharge. It is very important to mobilise because:

- it encourages you to breathe more naturally, taking deeper breaths which re-expand your lungs and make the clearance of phlegm easier.
- it boosts your circulation, reducing the risk of blood clots.
- it encourages your gut to function normally reducing the risk of constipation and bloating.

A member of staff will continue to work with you until you are safe to mobilise on your own. You will need to go for regular short walks, to build up your strength and fitness.

You will be given a discharge information pack prior to leaving the ward.

A member of staff will usually assess your ability to climb the stairs before you go home.

Do not attempt stairs without a member of staff unless told otherwise.

## Sternal (breastbone) care

Your breastbone should take between 6-8 weeks to heal following surgery. During this time you need to avoid pushing or pulling through your arms or carrying heavy loads (over 2kg).

You may find that after surgery your shoulders can become stiff. Make sure that you are regularly stretching your shoulder in all directions. Stop if this becomes painful.