Discharge Information and Instructions
After Heart Surgery

Most patients have the same concerns after surgery. What can I expect? How should I care for my incision? When can I resume my normal activities? The following general guidelines are intended to answer these questions. Each person is unique, however, and you may have special needs or concerns. If you do not find an answer to your questions here, please ask your nurse or cardiac surgeon for more information.

What to Expect
• Most patients find that they get tired very easily after the operation. While everyone heals differently, most people feel back to normal within 6 to 8 weeks after surgery.
• Soreness across your chest, neck, and back may persist for several months. Take prescribed pain medication to relieve discomfort.
• It is common to feel slightly winded with activity.
• You may require a couple of pillows to sleep.
• If you have an incision on your leg, it is normal to have swelling. Remember to elevate your leg while sitting.
• It is normal to have a decreased or sluggish appetite. Eat small, frequent meals.

Care of your Incisions
• Gently wash the incision with warm water and mild soap every day. Showers are okay. Lightly pat the incision dry with a towel.
• Steri-strips (paper strips/tape) will fall off within 3 –10 days, don’t be afraid to gently pull them off if they don’t fall off by themselves.
• If you have stiches and/or staples, a medical professional should remove them within 10 days.
• It is normal for your wound to be sore, a little numb or itchy, and to look slightly red or bruised. This will improve within several weeks.

Activity
• Walking is the best activity after cardiac surgery, feel free to walk outside.
• Pace yourself: Light activity around the house; washing, dressing, walking on level ground.
• Keep your activity at a level where you can carry on a conversation. If you are too short of breath to talk, slow down.
Decrease or stop activity if you feel pain, dizziness, difficulty breathing, irregular heartbeats, heavy sweating, fatigue or if your heart is beating too fast.
Restrictions
• Do not lift or push more than 10 pounds
• Do not drive for 4-6 weeks after your surgery
• Sexual activity: Wait 3 to 4 weeks. Be well rested and chose a comfortable position that puts the least amount of stress on your chest.

Medications
• You were given a list of medications with your discharge materials. Your medications may be different than before surgery.
• Follow your medication schedule and only take the medications on your list.
• Do not take any other medications unless you first discuss it with your doctor.
• Do not take pain medication before driving or with alcohol
• If you are on Coumadin Therapy, you will need to be monitored on a regular basis.

Diet
• Eat a sensible, low-fat, low-salt diet.
• Do not add salt to your food. Too much salt will cause swelling.
• Drink 8 glasses of water every day, unless your doctor says otherwise.

When to call for help
• Severe chest pain or tightness
• Extreme shortness of breath
• Fainting
• Chest wound that begins to pull apart or starts leaking
• Weight gain of more than 3 pounds in one day
• Fever greater than 100° F and/or chills
• Pounding or new onset of irregular heart beats
• Dizziness or light-headedness that does not go away with rest
• Persistent nausea or vomiting
• Severe incisional pain not relieved with pain medication
• Persistent fatigue
• Persistent depression

Whom and Where to Call

• Monday thru Friday 8:00 AM-5:00 PM:
  Call the Cardiac Surgery Nurse Coordinator: (415) 353-1660

• After 5:00 PM or on weekends/holidays:
  Call the Cardiac Surgery office: (415) 353-1606

There is always a cardiac surgeon on call.