



Going home and continuing your recovery



Going home after surgery can be both a relief and a bit daunting. Here Simon Kendall (heart surgeon) and Chrissie Bannister (heart surgery nurse) cover everything you need to know about going home including when you can go home, what the first few days and weeks are like, and your ongoing recovery.

When can you go home?

There are no set rules for when you go home after heart surgery. You can go home when you feel confident and well enough to return to a safe environment. Physiotherapists often ask you to climb a set of stairs as this is a good indication that you're ready. Usually, you'll return to your own home, but you may go to stay with friends or family, or go to convalescence care. This can happen as early as the third or fourth day after your operation, as long as all is well.

If you're weaker, you may need to take a bit more time before you're strong enough and able to go home. If this is the case for you, you may go to a local hospital nearer to your home.

In general, if you live alone, it's a good idea to have someone staying with you for three to four days until you feel confident to be on your own.

Preparing to go home

The timing of discharge from hospital is a decision that you, your family, your carers, the nursing staff and the medical staff make together. Before you go home, you'll go to what's called a discharge briefing. At this meeting, your nurse will explain the medication you'll be going home with. Your nurse will also give you telephone numbers so you can make contact if you have any problems once you get home. The numbers are for the cardiothoracic ward. Your rehabilitation nurses will also usually give you a leaflet that contains some other phone numbers that you might need.

The first few days at home

During your first few days at home, it's likely that you won't have much energy and appetite. This is normal, so don't panic if you don't feel like eating. Do try to stay hydrated though, and eat what you can. It may help to have some meals prepared in your freezer that you can heat up and eat easily. If you're feeling well enough, you may want to take short walks outside. It's a good idea to have someone with you the first few times you do this.

It's better to have a shower rather than a bath. This is for two reasons. One, you won't be able to lift yourself out of the bath. And two, it's important that you don't get your dressing soaking wet. Be careful not to rub the dressing with a towel when you dry yourself.

A month later

In general, it will take about four weeks for your breastbone to heal and this is the time you may be able to start driving again. But do check with your doctor first that it's safe to do so. This will also be the time when you can start helping around the house as well as helping with other everyday activities like shopping. You won't be able to push the trolley or lift heavy bags but it's good to get out and about and go shopping with someone. Walking is also really good - this is because it doesn't put any pressure on your healing breastbone. Have a rest afterwards if you need to.

Continuing your recovery

You'll be reviewed in the surgical clinic at your local hospital approximately six weeks after your operation. At this point, you'll be taking paracetamol once or twice a day. Your recovery continues for at least 12-18 weeks and most people return to work around 10-12 weeks after their surgery. When you return to work will depend on the surgery you had, how well you've healed, and the type of job you do. Getting back to work sooner rather than later can help your recovery.

What to expect physically and emotionally after discharge

There are some common symptoms that you may have when you get home. These include:

- night sweats
- deep sighing
- being short tempered
- feeling emotional and crying easily
- stiffness between the shoulder blades and the base of the neck
- initial numbness around the wound on the chest followed by a feeling of great sensitivity where even the touch of a shirt or blouse can be uncomfortable

These symptoms can feel difficult and unpleasant to go through. However, remember that they are all temporary, and they'll gradually get better with time. ▶

Cardiac rehabilitation programme

It's highly recommended that you join a cardiac rehabilitation programme. This is an opportunity to share experiences with other patients as well as to receive instructions and support on lots of aspects of your recovery. For example, you'll get advice about a healthy lifestyle, diet and exercise, which will all help you recover from the surgery.

It is important to keep in regular contact with your GP about your medication. He or she will also keep an eye on your heart to prevent or slow down further problems.