

Exercise After Lung or Heart Surgery with Thoracotomy Incision

To help you live a healthy, active life



Your health care providers recommend you exercise regularly as part of your recovery. Talk with your physical therapist or primary care provider about the details of your exercise program. This handout will help guide you while you recover after surgery. It also explains how to increase your activities safely.

Be Careful After Surgery

After surgery, you will need to follow incision precautions for:

- ☐ Your right arm ☐ Your left arm ☐ Both arms

Follow these precautions for:

- **4 weeks** if you have an incision on 1 side (unilateral)
- **6 weeks** if you have incisions on both sides (bilateral)

DO NOT do these things with your arm(s) on the side(s) your incisions are on:

- Lift, push, pull, or carry anything that weighs more than **15 pounds if you have a unilateral incision, or 10 pounds if you have a bilateral incision**. This includes pets, children, garbage, laundry, and groceries (a gallon of milk weighs 8 pounds).
- Unscrew tight lids or open heavy doors.
- Lift your elbows above your shoulders. For example, do not reach for items on a high shelf.
- Reach behind you, since this will stretch your incisions. For example, do not lean back on your arm(s) or reach behind you to wipe after using the toilet.
- Vacuum, garden, rake, or mow the lawn.
- Drive any motor vehicles. Your reaction time is slower and you are at higher risk for injuring your chest area.

For 3 months after surgery, do NOT:

- Exercise vigorously.
- Play sports with handheld equipment (tennis, golf, skiing, paddling, etc.) or any other activities that could cause injury to your chest area.

Add or Keep Exercise in Your Daily Routine

Talk with your doctor about when you can start exercising. The right exercise will help you:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| • Recover from your surgery | • Maintain mobility and muscle tone |
| • Control your blood pressure | • Decrease your back, shoulder, and chest muscle pain |
| • Lower risk of depression | • Increase your endurance and your body's efficiency |
| • Sleep better | |



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Exercise Goals

Slowly work up to walking at least **30 minutes, total, every day**.

- Start by walking 3 times a day for about 5 minutes each time. Each week, increase the total time you walk by about 3 minutes until you are walking for a total of 30 minutes a day.
- Warm up and cool down for 5 minutes before and after you walk by doing exercises your physical therapist has assigned, or by walking more slowly.
- Remember to add in the time for your return trip. Do not walk until you are tired.
- Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes.
- Avoid steep hills and inclines (slopes) as much as possible.
- It is OK to walk on a treadmill at a slow speed (3.0 mph or less).
- Exercise at a moderate level (3 to 5 on a scale of 0 to 10. See ‘Exercise Intensity Guidelines’ below).

Exercise Intensity Guidelines

For the first 10 weeks after surgery, it is important that you **work at a low to moderate level** to help your heart recover. To figure out the right level of *exertion* (effort), rate your effort on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being least effort and 10 being greatest effort.

The table below shows the Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) scale. You are exercising at the right level if you are working **between levels 3 and 5 on the scale of 0 to 10**. The area outlined in bold halfway down the table is your Goal Training Zone.



Slowly work up to walking at least 30 minutes, total, every day.

	RPE	Workload	Talk Test
	0	Very, very light	At rest
	1	Very light	Gentle walking or strolling
	2	Fairly light	Steady pace, not breathless
Goal Training Zone	3		
	4		
	5	Hard	Very brisk walking, must take a breath every 4 to 5 words
	6		
	7	Very hard	Cannot talk and keep pace
8			
9	Very, very hard		
10			

Table adapted from Avers, D., & Brown, M. (2009). White Paper Strength Training for the Older Adult. *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy*, 32(4), 148-152.

Pay Attention to Your Body

Slow down if:

- Your body is working at more than a moderate level of effort (more than 5 on a scale of 0 to 10).
- For more than 10 minutes after you STOP exercising you are very short of breath or your pulse is 20 beats per minute higher than when you started exercising.
- You cannot sleep, or you feel more tired than normal the day after you exercise.
- You feel a lot of pain in your joints, muscles, or incisions.
- You have swelling in your legs or feet that is getting worse.

Do not exercise if:

- You have a cold, flu, or fever.
- You have diabetes and it is out of control.
- You feel a lot of emotional stress.
- You are much more tired than normal.

Call your doctor if:

- You have pain or pressure in your chest, arms, or throat.
- You are dizzy, lightheaded, have blurry vision, or feel faint.
- You are confused or suddenly clumsy.

If you need medical care right away, call 9-1-1.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Your physical therapist will answer your questions about exercise during your therapy sessions in the hospital.

Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns about your medical care.