

Heart surgery

Information for patients

This booklet is designed to help you understand what to expect before, during, and after your heart surgery. It covers:

- coronary artery bypass graft (CABG)
- heart valve surgery
- aortic surgery (such as aneurysm repair)

It explains the reasons for surgery, the benefits and risks, and how to prepare and recover safely.

Your surgeon, anaesthetist, and cardiac care team will also give you specific advice tailored to your needs. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to speak to the team caring for you.

Confirming your identity

Before you have a treatment or procedure, our staff will ask you your name and date of birth and check your ID band. If you do not have an ID band we will also ask you to confirm your address. If we do not ask these questions, then please ask us to check. Ensuring your safety is our primary concern.

Understanding your operation

Coronary artery bypass graft (CABG)

This operation improves blood flow to the heart muscle. A healthy blood vessel (usually taken from your leg, arm, or chest) is used to 'bypass' a blocked or narrowed artery in your heart.

This helps reduce chest pain (angina) and may lower your risk of a heart attack.

Heart valve surgery

Heart valve surgery repairs or replaces one or more of the valves that control blood flow through the heart.

- Valve repair: Your own valve is fixed so it works properly again.
- Valve replacement: The valve is replaced with either a mechanical valve (made from metal and plastic) or a biological valve (made from animal or human tissue).

Aortic surgery

This involves repairing or replacing part of the aorta, the main artery that carries blood from your heart to the rest of your body.

It may be needed if the aorta has become enlarged (aneurysm) or damaged.

Before your operation

Pre-Assessment Clinic

You'll be invited to a pre-assessment appointment before your surgery.

Here, you'll:

- meet members of the surgical and anaesthetic teams
- have blood tests, an ECG, and possibly a chest X-ray or other tests
- review your current medicines
- discuss what to expect and have any questions answered

Please bring:

- a list of all medicines you take
- details of any allergies

Preparing for surgery

- Stop smoking if possible – it improves healing and recovery.
- Maintain a balanced diet and stay active if you can.
- Follow any instructions about fasting (not eating or drinking) before surgery.
- Some medicines, like blood thinners, may need to be stopped – your team will advise you.
- Please follow the checklist for preparing for surgery on page 5 to make sure you've completed everything you need before your operation.

Day of surgery

When you arrive

- You'll change into a hospital gown and have your final checks.

- The anaesthetist will explain how they'll keep you asleep and comfortable during surgery.
- You'll then go to the operating theatre.

The surgery is carried out under general anaesthetic (you'll be asleep).

Depending on the procedure, surgery can take 3 to 6 hours.

After the operation, you'll be taken to the Cardiac Recovery Unit (CRU) for monitoring.

After the operation

Immediately after surgery

- You'll wake up in CRU with monitoring equipment attached.
- A breathing tube may be in place temporarily.
- You'll have drips, drains, and heart monitoring wires attached to you – these are removed as you recover.

Moving to the ward

Once stable, you'll move to a cardiac surgery high dependency unit or the ward.

You'll begin gentle movement and breathing exercises with physiotherapists to help prevent complications.

Pain and discomfort

You may feel sore around the chest wound and where grafts were taken.

Pain relief will be provided – please ask if you need more.

Benefits and risks

Benefits

- Improved blood flow to the heart.
- Relief of chest pain and breathlessness.
- Better heart function and quality of life.
- Reduced risk of heart attack (for CABG).

Risks

All surgery carries some risk. Possible complications include:

- infection or bleeding
- irregular heartbeat
- stroke or heart attack
- kidney problems
- reaction to anaesthetic

Your surgeon will discuss your individual risk in detail before surgery.

Alternatives to surgery

Depending on your condition, alternatives may include:

- medicine to control symptoms

- angioplasty and stents (for coronary artery disease)
- less invasive procedures (for some valve problems)

Your cardiologist will explain whether these are suitable for you.

Going home

Most people go home about 5 to 10 days after surgery, depending on recovery.

Before discharge, your team will:

- check your wounds and remove any stitches or clips
- review medicines
- give you an exercise and recovery plan
- arrange follow-up appointments

At home

- Take short walks and gradually increase activity.
- Avoid heavy lifting or driving for at least 6 weeks.
- Keep your wound clean and dry.
- Contact your GP or hospital if you notice skin discolouration, swelling, discharge, or fever.

You may feel tired or emotional – this is normal. Full recovery can take up to 12 weeks.

Cardiac rehabilitation

You'll be invited to join a local cardiac rehabilitation programme once you're home.

This helps you build strength, confidence, and knowledge about living with a heart condition.

It includes:

- gentle supervised exercise
- advice on diet and lifestyle
- emotional and psychological support

Sex after heart surgery

It is safe to have sex after heart surgery. You and your partner may understandably feel anxious that sexual activity could strain your heart or damage your chest wound. However, research shows that the physical effort involved in sex – including orgasm – is similar to climbing about 20 stairs.

This means that once you are walking comfortably and managing your normal daily activities, it is safe to resume sexual activity.

Getting back to sexual activity

- Start slowly, just as you would when returning to other physical activities.
- Choose a time when you feel relaxed and rested.
- If you experience discomfort around your chest wound, try changing positions to find what feels most comfortable.

Your partner may be more anxious than you are, worrying that you could experience pain or another heart problem. Open and honest communication about how you both feel can help you rebuild confidence together.

If you experience sexual difficulties

Some people notice temporary changes in sexual function (for example, impotence or reduced desire). This is common and often improves with time as you recover physically and emotionally. If the problem continues, please speak to your GP – help and treatments are available.

Emotional wellbeing

Recovering from heart surgery can be as much an emotional journey as a physical one. Feeling tired, anxious, or less confident about intimacy is normal. Support is available from your cardiac nurse, rehabilitation team, or counsellor if you or your partner would like to talk things through.

Checklist for preparing for surgery

Being well prepared before your heart surgery can help your hospital stay and recovery go more smoothly. Use the checklist below to make sure you've completed everything you need before your operation.

1. Before you come to hospital

- **Pre-assessment appointment** – attend your hospital pre-assessment clinic. Bring a list of all your medicines, including any herbal or over-the-counter remedies.
- **Medical information** – tell your team about any allergies, implants, or health conditions (such as diabetes or sleep apnoea).
- **Smoking and alcohol** – try to stop smoking and avoid alcohol for at least 24 hours before surgery.
- **Vaccinations** – check that your COVID-19, flu and pneumonia vaccines are up to date.
- **Weight and exercise** – follow your surgeon's advice on healthy eating and activity before surgery.
- **Arrange help at home** – plan for someone to collect you from hospital and assist you for the first week after you return home.

2. Day before surgery

- **Fasting instructions** – follow the guidance from your pre-assessment team about when to stop eating and drinking. Usually, you should not eat anything for 6 hours before your operation, though you may be allowed small sips of water until 2 hours before.
- **Medicine check** – confirm which medicines to take or stop before surgery (especially blood thinners or diabetes medicines).
- **Bath or shower** – wash thoroughly the night before to reduce the risk of infection. Avoid using lotions or deodorants after washing. The ward nurses will advise you.
- **Pack your hospital bag** (see 'What to bring to hospital' below).

3. What to bring to hospital

Important

Pack light but include the essentials. Please only bring a small bag with you and do not bring large amounts of valuables or property with you. There is limited storage space next to each bed on the wards.

Documents and information

- Admission letter and any hospital paperwork.
- A list of your current medicines and doses.

- Your GP and emergency contact details.

Personal items

- Loose, comfortable clothing and nightwear.
- Slippers or comfortable shoes with non-slip soles.
- Toiletries (toothbrush, soap, shampoo, hairbrush, tissues, etc.).
- Glasses, dentures, or hearing aids if you use them.
- Your CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine if one has been prescribed to you.

Other helpful items

- Reading material, phone, or tablet (with charger).
- Small amount of money or bank card for personal use.
- This booklet or your patient notes.

Additional guidance

Post-operative bra

If you wear a bra, it is important to bring a non-wired bra to wear immediately after surgery. A front-fastening, full-support cotton bra is recommended, as it provides comfort and support to your chest while healing. They are widely available, and if you have a suitable non-wired support bra at home, you are welcome to use that.

If you don't have a suitable bra available, one option is the BHIS Post-Operative Cardiothoracic Support Bra (approximate cost £40). This can be ordered by telephone on 0800 279 2050 or online through the CUI Wear website: www.ciuwear.com

Valuables

Please do not bring valuables to hospital. It is very important that you do not bring any items of sentimental or monetary value with you when you come in for surgery.

While we take every care to keep your belongings safe, the hospital cannot accept responsibility or liability for the loss or damage of personal items.

If you need to bring essential items (such as a phone or small amount of money), please keep them to a minimum and store them securely.

4. Preparing your home

Before coming to hospital, it may help to:

- make sure your home is tidy and easy to move around
- set up a comfortable place to rest on your return (avoid climbing stairs if possible in the first few days)
- prepare and freeze some meals in advance
- ask family or friends to help with shopping, cooking, and transport for appointments

5. Emotional preparation

Feeling nervous before heart surgery is completely normal.

You may find it helpful to:

- talk to your cardiac nurse or pre-assessment team about any worries

- try relaxation techniques such as slow breathing or gentle stretching
- focus on your goals for recovery and the benefits surgery can bring

Who can I contact with queries or concerns?

Victoria and Albert Ward – available 24 hours

Tel: 020 3299 3308

Victoria and Albert High Dependency Unit (HDU) – available 24 hours

Tel: 020 3299 2771

Cardiac Recovery Unit (CRU) – available 24 hours, except weekends

Tel: 020 3299 5169

Cardiothoracic Admissions Manager – available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Tel: 020 3299 4054

Cardiac Health and Rehabilitation Team – available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Advice line and voicemail: 020 3299 3495

Cardiothoracic Secretaries – available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Tel: 020 3299 4365 or 020 3299 5104

Email: kch-tr.cardiologysecsgeneral@nhs.net

Outpatient appointment queries – available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Tel: 020 3299 1919 and select 'cardiac'

External information

Driver & Vehicle Licencing Agency (DVLA)

Tel: 0300 790 6806

www.gov.uk/dvla

[Coronary artery bypass or disease and driving – GOV.UK](#)

[Cardiovascular disorders: assessing fitness to drive – GOV.UK](#)

[Heart attacks, angioplasty, and driving – GOV.UK](#)

[Heart valve disease or replacement valve and driving – GOV.UK](#)

British Heart Foundation (BHF)

Tel: 0808 802 1234

www.bhf.org.uk

MyChart

Our MyChart app and website lets you securely access parts of your health record with us, giving you more control over your care. To sign up or for help, call us on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.mychart@nhs.net. To find out more visit www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart

Sharing your information

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit www.kch.nhs.uk.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

Tel: 020 3299 4618

Email: kings.pals@nhs.net

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.access@nhs.net