

After your cardiac surgery

Information for patients

This leaflet provides advice to support your physical and psychological wellbeing following cardiac (heart) surgery. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the team caring for you.

Contents

Physical wellbeing after cardiac surgery	3
Exercise	3
Rest and sleep	3
Caring for your wounds	3
Washing and bathing	4
Medicine	4
Pain relief	4
Sexual activity	4
Follow-up appointment	4
GP care	5
What activities should I avoid?	5
Important symptoms to look out for	5
Cardiac rehabilitation	5
Other useful resources	6
Psychological wellbeing and cardiac surgery	6
How might my surgery affect the way I feel?	6
What can help?	7
Further support	8
Who do I contact if I have queries or concerns?	8
MyChart	8
Sharing your information	8
Care provided by students	9
PALS	9

Physical wellbeing after cardiac surgery

Going home from hospital marks the first steps in your recovery, your long-term cardiac health and your physical fitness. When you get home, it is important for you to get into a daily routine to help you get back to normal.

Exercise

Keeping active is important. Start by going for a five-minute walk every day and increase this as you can. Aim for 'comfortable exertion' where you feel warmer, breathe a little deeper and faster but can still talk easily.

If you feel dizzy or out of breath, slow down or stop for a rest. By the end of four weeks at home, your goal should be to be able to walk briskly for 30 minutes.

If you have mobility problems, stay as active as you can and aim to be able to do what you did before your surgery.

You may feel breathless at first, but this should improve over time. If your breathing becomes worse than it was when you left hospital, please see your GP for a check-up.

Rest and sleep

It will take time for your health and fitness to improve. When you first go home, you may feel more tired than you did in hospital. This is normal, so a rest after lunch is a good idea.

It is important to sleep well at night. It is advisable you lie on your back in the first 4 to 6 weeks after your surgery. You can use pillows or a back rest to help prop you up in bed, if needed.

Caring for your wounds

Your wounds will take several weeks to heal, and it is important that you check them daily. If they become discoloured, painful, swollen or oozy, or you are worried about them, please go to your GP to have them checked as soon as possible.

Women should wear a soft, non-wired bra day and night as soon as possible for the month following surgery to reduce strain on the wound.

If your wounds are dry, you will not need any dressings on them. If you are sent home with dressings in place, it is important that you remove them within the first week at home to prevent infection.

If the wounds are oozy you may need to have the dressing changed by a practice nurse at your local surgery or a community district nurse. This is usually organised by the ward nurses before your discharge.

Please do not apply anything (lotion, cream, ointment, oil) onto the wounds while they are healing.

Your wound stitches are usually dissolvable. If you see a small piece outside your skin (which won't dissolve) or if you are discharged home with any non-dissolvable stitches (black stitches), they will be removed by your practice or district nurse.

Washing and bathing

You can shower or wash but do not have a bath in the first six weeks. This is because pushing up with your arms to get out of a bath will put too much pressure on your healing sternum and it is also advisable to avoid soaking your wounds.

Medicine

We will check you have the medicines you need before you go home. We will give you enough tablets to last you at least two weeks. See your GP for a repeat prescription within two weeks or before you run out of medications.

If you are not entitled to free NHS prescriptions, pre-payment certificates can help cover the cost. You can obtain these on a 3-monthly or 12-monthly basis and can pay by debit or credit card or direct debit. Please speak to your pharmacist about pre-payment certificates or call 0845 850 0030 for further advice. Visit www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/help-nhs-prescription-costs for more information.

Pain relief

You may have wound pain and/or discomfort in your neck, shoulders, back and legs. To ease your discomfort, we will give you a supply of painkillers. If you need more, see your GP for a repeat prescription. They can give you different painkillers if these are not strong enough.

Stay on the painkillers for as long as you need them. This is very important because if you do not control your pain it can slow down your recovery and make you feel low. Most people need to take regular pain relief for at least 3 to 4 weeks after discharge. When your pain starts easing, you can slowly reduce your dose.

Some painkillers may cause constipation. If this happens, drink plenty of water and eat a high-fibre diet. If this does not help, your GP may need to prescribe you a laxative.

Sexual activity

It is safe to resume sexual activity after your surgery whenever you and your partner feel ready. If you can comfortably climb two flights of stairs at a moderate pace without getting out of breath you are ready to resume your sex life. Like any activity after your surgery, start slowly.

Follow-up appointment

You will have your follow-up appointment at King's College Hospital or by telephone with one of the surgical team 6 to 8 weeks after discharge. You should receive a letter inviting you to this within 2 weeks of discharge. If you do not get one, please contact your consultant's secretary:

Consultants: Khan, Narayana and Selvaraj

Tel: 020 3299 4365

Email: kch-tr.cardiologysecsgeneral@nhs.net

Consultants: Baghai, Deshpande, Noorani and Whitaker

Tel: 020 3299 5104

Email: kch-tr.cardiologysecsgeneral@nhs.net

GP care

Please arrange to see your GP within the first two weeks of discharge for a routine check-up to ensure you are recovering well and to get a repeat prescription. We also advise you have a repeat blood test and blood pressure check at the GP surgery. Your GP can also sign you off work.

What activities should I avoid?

For six weeks after surgery:

- Do not drive. Tell your insurer you have had surgery. You do not need to inform the DVLA if you are a group 1 licence holder. If you are a bus or lorry driver or hold a Group 2 license, you must not drive and should contact the DVLA to inform them you had surgery.
- Avoid excess pushing and pulling and do not lift anything heavy, such as shopping or children (over 5lb or 2.3kg), because this puts a strain on your breastbone.

Important symptoms to look out for

You may feel a little short of breath when you first start walking. But if you have any of the following symptoms, please contact your GP or NHS 111 immediately, or go to your nearest Emergency Department:

- extreme shortness of breath (you find it hard to speak)
- palpitations which make you feel dizzy or faint
- excessive sweating
- feeling generally very unwell
- bleeding problems if on warfarin

Cardiac rehabilitation

Cardiac rehabilitation is a programme to support you when you go home and helps you recover from your surgery. It involves a general review of your health and cardiac risk factors, education, and exercise classes. You must be registered with a GP to access this service via the NHS.

All suitable patients are referred to their local cardiac rehabilitation service on discharge. This is based on the borough where your GP is located.

Your local cardiac rehabilitation team will contact you to discuss their programme. If you have not heard from your local team or do not know who your local team is and need the number, please call King's Cardiac Health and Rehabilitation Team on 020 3299 3495.

For more information about cardiac rehabilitation, access the British Heart Foundation information booklet by scanning this QR code or visit <https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/publications/treatments-for-heart-conditions/understanding-cardiac-rehabilitation>



Other useful resources

Understanding coronary artery bypass booklet (British Heart Foundation)

www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/publications/treatments-for-heart-conditions/understanding-coronary-artery-bypass-surgery



Eat better booklet (British Heart Foundation)

<https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/publications/healthy-eating-and-drinking/eat-better>



Psychological wellbeing and cardiac surgery

There is a strong connection between your physical and psychological health – they constantly interact and affect each other. We often see this with something as minor as a cold, which can leave us feeling down. It's perfectly normal to expect a major surgery, such as cardiac surgery, to impact your mood.

We understand that you have a lot on your mind right now. You may wish to save this information to read again after your surgery when you have more time to focus on it.

How might my surgery affect the way I feel?

Anxiety

Feeling shocked and worried is a very normal response to a surgery. It's a lot to process, and you might find yourself thinking about things like, 'How will I manage?', 'Will I be able to do the things I used to?', 'What will my future look like?' or 'Am I going to be okay?'.

We encourage you to share these fears and anxieties with a staff member or someone close to you. Sometimes, our worries can feel bigger when they are not shared and simply talking them through can make a huge difference. Our doctors and nurses are here to answer your questions and help ease your mind.

Depression

After surgery, it's normal for anxieties and worries to fade as you physically recover and get back to your routine. However, for some patients, these feelings can last longer.

High levels of anxiety can sometimes lead to depression. Feeling low can be made worse by a slower-than-expected recovery or increased pain. This can create a cycle where you feel less motivated to be active, and doing less makes you feel worse.

Cognitive difficulties

A small number of patients experience cognitive difficulties after surgery. This can range from mild memory issues to more complex problems in rare cases.

Some confusion and disorientation are common right after surgery as the anaesthesia wears off, but this usually clears up quickly. If you are concerned about more serious issues while you are in the hospital, a doctor can assess you and provide a referral for further support. For advice once you have left hospital, see 'Who do I contact if I have queries or concerns?' on page 8.

Anxiety itself can cause cognitive problems. When we are worried, our ability to remember and think clearly is often affected. Managing your anxiety can help these issues go away. Research shows that far more patients worry about cognitive problems than experience them.

What can help?

Pre-assessment clinic

A key part of the pre-assessment clinic is to give you information and answer your questions. Knowing what to expect can help reduce anxiety and depression before and after surgery. You can bring along a friend or family member for further support.

Cardiac rehabilitation

Physical activity and exercise can help improve mood and reduce anxiety. Cardiac rehabilitation not only helps your physical recovery but can also boost your confidence, allow you to meet others with similar experiences, and boost your mood.

See further page 5 above.

Friends and family

Friends and family can be an important part of your recovery. If someone attended the pre-assessment clinic with you, they can be a great person to talk to. While you might not want to burden them with your concerns, being honest about what you're going through is often more helpful than trying to hide it.

Relaxation

Relaxation techniques can help to manage stress and anxiety.

When you're feeling stressed, your body's 'fight-or-flight' response kicks in, raising your heart rate and blood pressure. Relaxation techniques help you activate your body's natural 'relaxation response' instead, bringing your body and mind back to a state of calm. This helps to slow your heart rate and breathing, which can make a big difference in how you feel.

Common relaxation techniques you can try are:

- deep breathing
- progressive muscle relaxation
- mindfulness and meditation
- guided imagery

Relaxation techniques are most effective when practiced regularly, not just when you are feeling stressed. Consistency helps train your body to enter the relaxation response more easily.

Clinical psychology

Clinical psychologists often work with patients dealing with health issues like heart problems because of the strong connection between our physical and emotional wellbeing. They can provide valuable support if you need extra help

A psychologist can help you work through your problems by exploring the links between your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

If you would like to explore this option, you can ask your GP for a referral or you can self-refer (via telephone or online) to your local NHS Talking therapies service (see below).

Further support

- British Heart Foundation
 - Heart Helpline: 0808 802 1234 (open weekdays 9am to 5pm excluding bank holidays)
 - www.bhf.org.uk
- Mind
 - Infoline: 0300 123 3393 (open weekdays 9am to 6pm except bank holidays)
 - www.mind.org.uk
- Talking therapies
 - www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/talking-therapies/
- Samaritans
 - 24-hour helpline: 116 123
 - www.samaritans.org
- Solidarity in a Crisis (SiaC) out-of-hours crisis helpline
 - For Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark residents
 - Tel: 0300 123 1922 (open Monday to Friday 6pm to midnight and weekends midday to midnight)
 - <https://certitude.org.uk/what-we-do/solidarity-in-a-crisis>

Who do I contact if I have queries or concerns?

- Your local Cardiac Rehabilitation Team
- Your GP
- Victoria and Albert Ward
 - Tel: 020 3299 4288 (24 hours a day)
- Cardiac Health and Rehabilitation Team
 - Tel: 020 3299 3495 (available Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm)
 - Email: kch-tr.cardiacrehab@nhs.net
- Cardiology Admin and Appointments Team
 - To cancel or reschedule appointments or non-invasive diagnostic tests
 - Tel: 020 3299 4480 (available Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm)
 - Email: kch-tr.cardiologysecsgeneral@nhs.net

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. Visit www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart to find out more.

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 nursing 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