

# Taking care of yourself after a cardiac surgery



You'll soon be going home after cardiac surgery. Here are some tips to help you take care of yourself over the next few weeks.



**After surgery**, your abilities will be limited. It will be more difficult to do your everyday activities. If you live alone, **have someone visit you at least once a week for the first 2 weeks.**

## How long will it take for me to recover?

It usually takes 2 to 3 months. Your participation is important.

## What should I do to recover well?

After cardiac surgery, you'll need to:

- pay attention to your incision
- relieve your pain
- do physical activities, except for some that should be avoided
- eat a healthy diet
- take your prescribed medication

**The instructions to follow for a good recovery are presented in the Appendix, starting on page 4.**



## When can I go back to work?

Usually it's possible to go back to work sometime between 4 weeks and 3 months after the surgery.

## Can I take part in cardiac rehabilitation program near me?

If you're interested in doing this, talk to your cardiologist, who can tell you if it's possible and when you can start.

## Is it normal to feel sad or anxious?

Yes, it's quite normal to feel unsettled, sad, or anxious. You're dealing with a changed body image due to, for example, new physical limitations and scars from the surgery.

These feelings should go away as you regain your strength. If they persist, or if you have insomnia or nightmares, talk to your family doctor or another health care professional.

Talk about your feelings with your partner, loved ones, or a psychologist. This can be just as important as any other treatment prescribed at the time of your discharge.



## What follow-up will I have?

Your care team will tell you what follow-up appointments to expect. Here are the main ones.

**Surgeon:** 1 to 3 months after your surgery. You'll be contacted with a date.

**Family doctor:** 1 month after your surgery. This is an important appointment to monitor your health and to adjust your medication if necessary. You'll need to make this appointment yourself.

**Cardiologist:** within 3 months after your operation. If your cardiologist isn't at the CHUM, you'll need to make the appointment yourself.

At each appointment, bring an up-to-date list of your medications.



## What signs should I watch for?

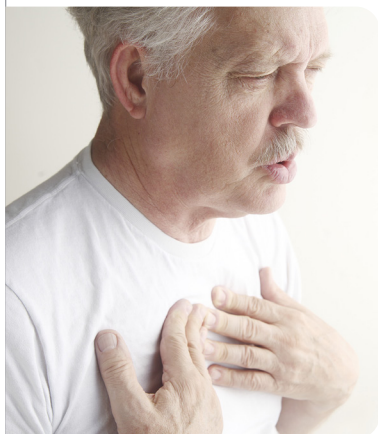
Call a nurse at the CHUM Patient Health Line at **514 890-8086** if you have any of the following symptoms within 30 days after your surgery:

- pain that gets worse over time despite taking pain medication
- signs of incision infection: redness, greenish or yellowish discharge, strong odour, fever higher than 38°C (100.4°F) for more than 24 hours
- significant bleeding from an incision (light bleeding that doesn't stop, or heavy bleeding)
- swelling in the legs that gets worse
- shortness of breath that gets worse for no obvious reason
- heart palpitations

**After physical activity.** If you have any nausea, headaches, dizziness, chest pain or palpitations, rest until the symptoms calm down. If the symptoms don't improve, call the CHUM Patient Health Line.



This service is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. When calling, be sure to have your health insurance (RAMQ) card on hand.



### Call the 9-1-1 emergency service if:

- You have sudden shortness of breath for no reason.
- You have chest pain (angina pain) like before the operation.

## Who can I contact if I have questions?

You can raise questions with your care team at your follow-up appointments.

If you have any concerns about your health, you can also phone the CHUM Patient Health Line at **514 890-8086**.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

To find a family doctor:  
Government of Quebec family medicine access portal  
> [quebec.ca/en/](http://quebec.ca/en/)  
Click on Health -> Finding a resource -> Registering with a family doctor

Biblio-Santé:  
See their thematic booklet on heart disease.  
> [bibliosante.ca/en/](http://bibliosante.ca/en/)  
Click on Thematic Booklets -> Heart Disease and Stroke

Heart & Stroke:  
For more information on healthy eating and recipes.  
> [heartandstroke.ca](http://heartandstroke.ca)  
Go to the Healthy Living tab

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website  
[chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

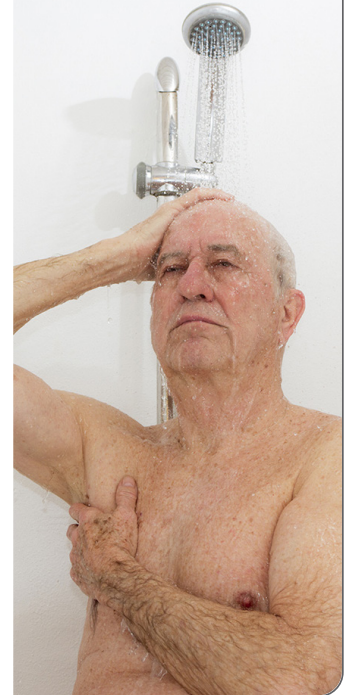
*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)

Follow the advice below for 2 months after surgery, unless you've been given another time frame.

### Incisions

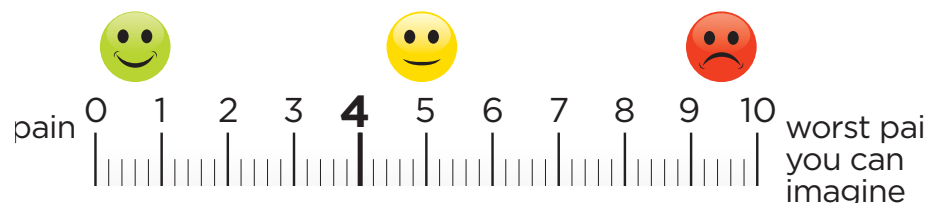
- > Wash in the shower with a fragrance-free soap. No bath, pool, or sauna until the skin is completely healed.
- > When drying yourself, gently blot your incision with a clean towel. Don't rub.
- > Don't put any cream, oil, perfume, or other products on your scars.
- > If you have any butterfly closures, they will come off by themselves after a few days. If not, remove them carefully under the shower after 7 days.
- > Brush your teeth at least twice a day to prevent infection.
- > For women: wear a wireless bra day and night until the skin is well closed. This helps the healing. If the bra is uncomfortable, slip a compress underneath it.
- > It's normal to have a little swelling above the scar (this will disappear over time) and numbness in the chest (up to 1 year after the surgery).



### Pain

It's normal to feel pain.

- > On a scale of 0 to 10, your pain should be between 0 and 4.
- > If it's more than 4, take the pain medications prescribed for you (e.g. Dilaudid, morphine, or anti-inflammatories).
- > Good pain management will help you heal faster.



## Physical activity

- > Stay active when you get home.
- > Take it slow: from one day to the next, try to increase the time spent on physical activity. Then, increase the intensity.
- > Referring to the scale on the right, your perceived effort level shouldn't be more than 2.
- > Walk every day at your own pace and ability.
- > Every day, do the exercises in the health fact sheet [Staying active in the hospital: Recover better with exercise.](#)
- > Plan some cool-down periods.

### For at least 2 months, DON'T:

- > Lift, push, or pull objects weighing more than 5 kg (about 10 lbs.).
- > Stretch out your arms fully.
- > Play golf, or do any combat sport, swimming, skiing, skating, outdoor cycling, shoveling, or wood chopping.

Effort level	Perceived intensity
0	None at all
0,5	Very, very easy
1	Very easy
2	Easy
3	Medium
4	A little difficult
5	Difficult
6	More difficult
7	Very difficult
8	
9	Very, very difficult
10	Maximum

## Breathing exercises (spirometry)

- > Continue doing the breathing exercises for at least 2 weeks after you return home.
- > Read the fact sheet [Les exercices respiratoires après une opération.](#) [in French].



## Sexual activity

- > Sexual activity is not advisable during the first month after your surgery.
- > When you resume sexual activity, be careful of your chest.
- > Avoid leaning too much on your hands. Positions where you're on your back are safer.



## Diet

- > Eat protein-rich foods (e.g. meat, milk, plant-based drinks, fish, eggs, legumes, tofu) at every meal and as snacks.
- > If you have difficulty eating well, consult the fact sheet [Eating a Protein-Rich, Energy-Dense Diet.](#)
- > In the long term, a Mediterranean-style diet is recommended.



## Alcohol

- > Alcohol is allowed in moderation.
- > Maximum 1 glass of wine (around 140 ml) or 1 beer (around 330 ml) per day.



## Travel

- > In general, travel is not recommended during the first 3 months after surgery.
- > If you want to travel, discuss it with your health care team first. Check with your insurance company and the carrier about the conditions that apply.
- > When traveling, keep your medications in your carry-on luggage. Leave them in their original container. This will ensure that you're not left without medication in case of delays or other problems.



## Driving a car

- > The Société d'assurance automobile du Québec recommends observing the following wait times before driving:
  - 4 weeks after cardiac surgery
  - the wait time can be longer for driving a professional vehicle: ask about it!
- > Check with your automobile insurer to know if any further wait time is required.
- > **When you're a passenger**, it's safer to sit in the back seat for at least 4 weeks. In an accident, the front passenger airbag can open and push against your chest.



## NOTEPAD



### Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.



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