



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

How to Protect Your Sternum After Surgery

This information explains how to protect your sternum (breastbone) after surgery.

If you had a median sternotomy, you'll need to protect your sternum while it's healing. A median sternotomy is when an incision (surgical cut) is made in the center of your chest and your sternum is divided during surgery. It's often done during a thymectomy (surgery to remove your thymus gland).

Your nurse, physical therapist (PT), or occupational therapist (OT) will go over these instructions with you before you're discharged from the hospital.

How to Protect Your Sternum

Most people should follow these instructions for 6 weeks after surgery. Your healthcare provider may tell you to follow them for more or less time. Follow their instructions.

- Hold a pillow against the incision on your chest when you cough or sneeze. This is called splinting your incision.
- Don't reach backwards with both arms at the same time. For example, don't reach behind you to scratch your back or hook the clasp on your bra.
- Don't lift anything heavier than 10 pounds (4.5 kilograms). A gallon of milk weighs about 8 pounds (3.6 kilograms).
 - At first, even objects lighter than 10 pounds (4.5 kilograms) may feel too heavy. Don't lift anything that causes pain or discomfort.
- When getting up from the bed, chair, or toilet, put most of your weight on your legs and use your leg strength to stand. Keep your arms close to your body.

- Keep your upper arms close to your body when you're lifting, pushing, or pulling. Don't lift, push, or pull anything that causes pain or discomfort. Examples of lifting, pushing, and pulling include:
 - Pulling or pushing on the banister while you're going up stairs.
 - Opening and closing heavy doors.
 - Walking a dog on a leash.
 - Using your arms while you're getting up from a chair, off the toilet, or in and out of bed.
 - Lifting items less than 10 pounds (such as pots and pans).
- Talk with your healthcare provider before going back to exercising.

Getting In and Out of Bed

It's important to get in and out of bed slowly and carefully to protect your sternum.

How to get out of bed

1. Move your feet to the edge of the bed. Roll onto your side (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Roll onto your side

2. Gently move your legs over the side of the bed.
3. Carefully use your arms to help yourself sit up (see Figure 2). Make sure you keep your arms close to your body.



Figure 2. Use your arms to help yourself sit up

How to get in bed

1. Sit on the side of the bed (see Figure 3).
2. Carefully use your arms to help yourself lie down. Make sure you keep your arms close to your body.
3. Gently move your legs over the side of the bed.

You can sleep in any position that doesn't cause discomfort. Many people are most comfortable on their side.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.



Figure 3. Sit on the side of the bed

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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