

Let's Talk About...

Sternal Precautions

Sternal precautions are ways to protect your child's sternum (breastbone) after heart surgery. A healthcare provider cuts the sternum to assess your child's heart during surgery. They usually repair the sternum with a wire to hold the bones in the right position. Follow these guidelines the first 6 weeks after surgery to protect your child's sternum as it heals.

How do I protect babies and children up to 5 years old?

To protect babies and young children the first 6 weeks after surgery:

- Start tummy time 2 weeks after the sternum is closed for up to 5 minutes at a time. You can do tummy time up to 4 times a day.
- Allow your baby to roll onto their belly on their own.
- Put a thin barrier over your baby's incision to protect it from the car seat buckle.
- Burp your baby in a supported sitting position or by holding their chest against your own.
- Let your toddler walk, but watch them closely.
- Lift your child by supporting their back, shoulders, and hips.
- Support your child's trunk (chest, belly, and back) when they are sitting or standing.

Never lift your child under their arms or pull them up using their arms.

When can my child return to normal activity?

Your child can increase activity 3 months after surgery and resume riding a balance bike or tricycle, dancing, and swimming. These activities don't include heavy lifting, swinging the arms or hanging by the arms. Your child should not play baseball or golf for at least 3 months.

Have your child wait 6 months before returning to team sports and more physical activities, including:

- Swinging from monkey bars
- Jumping on a trampoline
- Playing contact sports
- Doing gymnastics
- Skiing or snowboarding
- Going rock climbing

Your child's cardiologist (heart doctor) may need to approve competitive activities first.



Support your child's belly and back while they sit or stand.

How do I protect children, teens, and young adults (5 to 18 years old)?

To protect older children, teens, and young adults the first 6 weeks after surgery:

- Have your child walk for exercise and whenever possible (including climbing stairs).
- Let your child do only light lifting, up to 8 pounds (the same weight as a gallon of milk).
- Put a pillow across your child's chest when they're coughing, sneezing, or doing breathing exercises.
- Help your child avoid pushing up with their arms when standing after sitting or sitting up after lying down in bed.
- Encourage them to let friends carry their backpack at school.
- Help them move their arms in a comfortable range.
- Make sure they continue normal daily activities like eating, dressing, combing hair, and brushing their teeth.
- Have them avoid movements that cause pain, like twisting, straining, or throwing.
- Don't let your child push or pull with their arms. This includes opening and closing heavy doors, like a car door.

Don't pull on your child's arms when helping them sit or stand. Don't let them carry their backpack to school.



When should I call the doctor?

If you have any questions about your child's activities or movement or are concerned that your child's sternum is not healing the way it should, contact the cardiologist.

When can my child return to normal activity?

Your teen can begin driving 6 weeks after surgery and can increase activity 3 months after surgery. Low-impact activities include:

- Running
- Road biking
- Dancing
- Swimming

These activities don't include heavy lifting, swinging the arms, or hanging by the arms. Your child should not play baseball or golf for at least 3 months.

Have your child wait 6 months before returning to competitive sports and activities, including:

- Playing contact sports
- Lifting weights
- Doing gymnastics
- Golfing
- Skiing or snowboarding
- Mountain biking
- Rock climbing

Your child's cardiologist may need to approve competitive activities first.

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