

# Caring for Your Child After Heart Surgery



Going home after heart surgery can be both a happy and anxious time. This information is meant as a guide to help you care for your child at home. More information can be found in the Heart and Soul book. Please discuss any questions or concerns with your child's nurse, or call the Children's Heart Centre.

## Care of Your Child's Incision

- Check the incision daily for signs of infection: redness, swelling, drainage, if wound edges start to come apart or fever above (38° C). Call the Children's Heart Centre if any of these signs are noted.
- Lightly wash the incision (including steri-strips) and chest tube sites at least once a day with soap and water, dry thoroughly. The best way to prevent infection is to keep the incision clean and dry (shower or sponge bath until all of the steri-strips fall off).
- Steri-strips may start to fall off on their own after about a week. It is ok to trim them after they start to peel off. If they are not off by the time of your child's follow up appointment, they will be removed at that time.
- Do not use lotions, creams or powders until all the scabs are off.
- Do not go swimming or immerse the wound in a bathtub until all the scabs are off. Your child can have a shallow tub bath or shower 7 days after the operation.
- Discourage your child from scratching or picking at the wound.
- Healing tissue is more sensitive to sun damage than normal skin. Clothing or a high SPF sun block (SPF 30+) should protect your child's incision when sun exposure cannot be avoided. These precautions should be taken as long as the scar looks pink (usually it returns to their normal skin color in about a year).

## Diet

### Infants:

If your baby is breastfeeding, he can feed as often as he wants. She may feed more frequently at first.

If your baby is formula-feeding, he can take as much formula as he wants unless otherwise instructed. He may need extra calories because his heart may be working harder than most babies. If your baby needs a high calorie formula, you will be given a recipe for the formula before going home.

Limit feeding time to 20 - 30 minutes so your baby doesn't become overtired.

*See Heart & Soul Chapter 9, page 12 for more information.*

### Toddlers, School-aged Children, and Adolescents:

Offer your child a regular diet unless otherwise instructed. Encourage a balanced diet of foods that promote healing: meats, milk, bread products, fruits and vegetables.

Some children may need more iron in their diet if their hemoglobin is low.

Older children may need a higher fibre diet to avoid straining for 2-3 weeks.

## Pain Management

Your child may continue to need Tylenol or Codeine for pain for several weeks after surgery, especially at night.

## Activity

### Infants:

Long bouts of crying may overstress your infant. Tend to your baby's needs to prevent long periods of crying. Lift your infant by supporting his head and bottom with your hands for four weeks after surgery.

### Toddlers, Preschoolers, School-age children, and Adolescents:

Most children will limit their own activity when they become tired. Inactivity should not be encouraged. However, your child should refrain from any activity that puts them at risk for falling or taking a blow to the chest incision for 4-6 weeks after surgery. This includes activities such as:

- climbing
- riding bicycles
- roller skating or roller blading
- participation in gym class or contact sports (ask about specific sports at your follow up appointment)

Climbing stairs is not a problem.

Swimming is ok once all of the scabs have fallen off.

Your child should avoid:

- wearing backpacks or carrying heavy books for 4-6 weeks.
- automobile front seats with air bags for 4-6 weeks.
- heavy lifting (anything over 10 pounds) for 4-6 weeks.

Adolescents of driving age should not drive a car for one month and may require a review of their health before resuming driving. Check with the Cardiologist at your follow up appointment.

## Behavior

Due to your child's hospitalization and surgery, it is not unusual for him to go back to earlier childhood behaviors such as: bedwetting, awakening during the night, fussiness, nightmares, clinging to parents, etc. These behaviors gradually decrease within a short period of time. It is important to support your child during this stressful time but also to set appropriate limits. If your child needs additional support, please contact the Children's Heart Centre nurses.

## School and Day Care

Your child can attend school or day care about 2 weeks after he goes home, but may need to start with half days.

## Immunizations

Children should not receive most immunizations for at least 3 weeks after surgery. If your child has received blood products while hospitalized, a wait of up to 6 months may be necessary, particularly for chickenpox and MMR vaccines. Ask your pediatrician or call our office if you have questions about specific immunizations.

Children who have received steroids for PPS should wait 2 weeks after steroids have been stopped before resuming immunizations. It is recommended that all children aged 6-24 months receive the flu vaccine in the fall. Please discuss this with your pediatrician.

## Dental Care

Most children with heart defects require antibiotics prior to dental procedures to prevent infection. Please be sure to talk to your dentist and cardiologist regarding your child's dental care. Good dental hygiene and regular visits to the dentist are important since tooth decay can lead to heart infection.

See *Heart & Soul* chapter 9 - page 17 and chapter 2 - page 13 for more information.

## Questions and Concerns

Call if your child has 2 or more of the following:

- rapid breathing
- excessive sweating
- extreme sleepiness
- unable to drink bottle for 2 feedings in a row
- puffiness of the eyes or face
- extreme irritability
- blueness of the skin
- fever above 38° C
- abdominal pain or no interest in eating

Refer to handouts or *Heart and Soul: Chapter 2, page 8* and *Chapter 10, page 14*.

## Important Phone Numbers:

Children's Heart Centre:  
604-875-2120  
Monday to Friday  
8:00am to 4:00pm



### Pediatric Cardiologist:

#### BC Children's Hospital Switchboard:

604-875-2161 for Cardiologist on call, if you need to reach a Cardiologist after hours.

### Cardiothoracic Surgery Office:

604-875-3165  
8:30am to 5:00pm  
Voicemail after hours

**Bring your discharge information and Heart & Soul book (if you have one) to your follow-up appointments.**

*Developed by the health care professionals of the Cardiology Department with assistance from the Department of Learning & Development*