

Sternal precautions — if you had a sternotomy

If your chest was opened down the middle, simple rules protect the healing breastbone for the first weeks — here's what they are and why they matter.

The first two weeks at home

Educational draft. Clinical review pending. Quotations retained from the original text are not verified member testimonials.

Sternal precautions are the simple rules that protect your breastbone while it heals after the chest was opened down the middle — a set of “don'ts” for the first several weeks that keep force off the healing bone.

A sternotomy means the surgeon divided your breastbone to reach the heart, and the bone is now healing like a fracture. The healing is strong in weeks, but it needs a period of protection — usually six to eight weeks, but your team decides. The rules are easy to understand and easy to break without thinking: lifting, pushing, pulling, or using your arms to heave yourself up all put force through the chest, and that force is exactly what the precautions exist to avoid. Most people break a precaution not from rebellion but from habit — reaching for a heavy pan, pushing a door, hoisting a child.

The rules in plain words

- Don't lift anything heavier than a few kilograms — your team gives your exact limit; until then, if it's heavier than a full kettle, it waits
- Don't push, pull or carry: doors, shopping, vacuum cleaners, children, luggage — ask for help, that's what the first weeks are for
- Don't use your arms to push yourself up from a chair or bed — roll onto your side and push with one hand
- Don't raise both arms above your head with weight, or reach and twist in ways that strain the chest
- Support your chest when you cough or sneeze — a firm pillow hugged to the chest spreads the force

Driving gets its own mention: in the early weeks, the force of steering, and the airbag in an accident, are both risks to a healing breastbone — most teams restrict driving for a while. Ask before you assume it's fine; the answer may also be tied to your medicines.

What healing feels like

Expect the chest to feel odd: a deep ache, a sense of heaviness on the bone, clicking or grating sensations when you move — many people describe it as an elephant sitting on the chest, and it eases as the bone knits. What matters is the direction of change: most people feel the ache fade week by week. A sudden pop or crunch with sharp pain during movement is worth a call, not a shrug.

What to ask your team

- How long do my precautions last, exactly, and what's my lifting limit?
- When can I drive, and when can I lift my child?
- Which movements are still fine — cooking, stairs, gentle stretching?
- What should the bone feel like as it heals, and what should I report?

Call for help if

You feel or hear a sudden pop or crunch in the chest bone with sharp pain; the wound area over the bone becomes red, hot or open; or you have breathlessness or pain that is getting worse. If the chest feels unstable or shifts when you move, get urgent help.

Take it to your team

Before discharge, ask for the precautions in writing, with dates — “until this date, no lifting over X”. A written list on the fridge turns “be careful” into something the whole household can follow.

The breastbone heals on its own schedule, and the rules that protect yours — how long, how much, when you can drive — are decisions for your own team. Your job is to follow them and to ask when anything feels off.

Questions to take to my team

☐ How long do my precautions last, exactly, and what's my lifting limit?

☐ When can I drive, and when can I lift my child?

☐ Which movements are still fine — cooking, stairs, gentle stretching?

☐ What should the bone feel like as it heals, and what should I report?

For discussion and personal reference. Your care team's individual instructions take priority. For an emergency, contact your local emergency service; do not wait for a community reply.