SCARSTORIES · A LITTLE COMPANY ON THE WAY

# When can I drive?

Driving after heart surgery is a safety question — for you and everyone else on the road — not just a milestone. Here's how the decision actually gets made, and what to do while you wait.

Returning to everyday life

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> Educational content.

Driving is one of the first things people ask about after heart surgery — and one of the few decisions where “how you feel” isn't the whole answer. It matters for three reasons: your healing breastbone (a hard brake or sudden swerve uses your chest, arms and shoulders), your reaction time (anaesthesia, fatigue and some medications change it for a while), and the small but real risk of a sudden medical event at the wheel. That's why your team treats it as a safety question, not a milestone.

## How the timing actually works

There is no universal date, and anyone who quotes one to you is guessing. Most people who have had open-heart surgery hear “weeks, not days” — often somewhere between two and six weeks for local, familiar routes, and often longer for motorway driving or long journeys. People who had less invasive procedures may hear a shorter range. The exact answer depends on your healing, your procedure and your team's rules — not on what a friend, a forum or a taxi driver says.

## What it means for real life

- Don't drive while taking strong painkillers that make you drowsy — ask your team which of your medicines affect driving or concentration, and for how long.
- Practise first: a quiet car park, a familiar street. An emergency stop in week two feels very different in week six, and your chest will tell you why.
- Plan to be a passenger for the first weeks. It's a phase, not a loss of independence — and it's a good phase for the people who love you.

- Tell your insurance company about your surgery. Some policies require it, and if something happens, an undeclared operation can turn an accident into a financial disaster. It's one phone call.

## What to ask your team

The most useful question is: “What exactly am I waiting for before I can drive?” The answer is often specific — a number of weeks, a check at your follow-up, or being able to brace against the steering wheel without chest pain. Ask which of your medicines affect driving, and ask them to write the answer down. You'll be amazed how much of it you forget by the time you reach the car.

> **Take it to your team**
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> Ask: what am I waiting for — a date, a test, or a symptom check? Which of my medicines could affect my driving, and when can I expect that to change? Can you give me a note for work or insurance confirming my driving status?

> **Call for help if**
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> You feel chest pain, severe breathlessness, dizziness, or a racing heart while out of the house — and especially if you ever feel these at the wheel. Pull over somewhere safe as soon as you can, switch off the engine, and call for help. Do not try to drive yourself to hospital.

## A last word

It is completely normal to hate this restriction. Driving is independence, and handing it over — even briefly — feels like a loss. But the decision isn't about how eager you feel; it's about what your body can do in the split second of an emergency. The timing, the rules and the clearance belong to your own team. Let them be the ones to say yes.

## Questions to take to my team

- [ ] What needs to happen before I can drive: a date, examination or symptom review?

- [ ] Which medicines could affect driving, and for how long?

- [ ] Can I have written advice for my employer or insurer?

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.