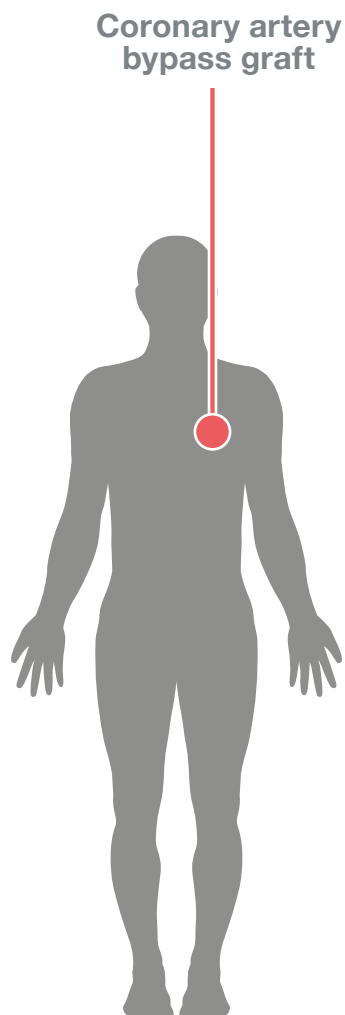


# Get Well Soon

Helping you to make a speedy recovery after surgery to bypass a damaged blood vessel that supplies blood to the heart



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This leaflet is a guide to recovering from a coronary artery bypass graft. It does not provide specific medical advice or diagnosis. Nor does it give advice about whether you should consent to an operation. All of these matters depend on individual medical advice from your consultant surgeon based on your own health, medical condition and personal circumstances.

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## Who this leaflet is for

Print instructions:

To print this document click once on the print icon in your Acrobat Browser, or go to File, then Print on the drop down menu.

To print only one page, select the page number you want in your print menu, usually under 'options' or 'preferences' depending on the printer type.

To save ink, select the 'draft' option.

This leaflet is for anyone who is recovering from, or is about to undergo surgery to bypass (or 'get around') a narrowed coronary artery and improve the blood supply to the heart.

The technical term for your operation is a coronary artery bypass graft, which is how your surgeon and other health professionals who are helping you may refer to it.

This leaflet should be read in conjunction with any other information you have already been given about your procedure.

The following information is designed to help you to plan your recovery - such as when you should go back to work, drive a car again, and generally just get back to enjoying life the way you like it. Your surgeon, GP and other healthcare professionals will offer you a lot of very good advice - but ultimately it's you that has to make the decisions.

The advice in this leaflet offers broad guidelines for people who do not have any complications with their surgery, or other specific medical circumstances, such as a long-term condition.

Obviously, every individual has different needs and recovers in different ways - so not all the advice in this leaflet will be suitable for everybody. When you're weighing up how to make the decision that's right for you, talk to your surgeon, your GP, or your Occupational Health service at work, if you have one. They will all help you to make the right choices for a safe and speedy recovery.

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## What to expect after the operation

### Painkillers

Painkillers may well cause constipation, so it's important to get plenty of fibre in your diet while you are recovering. Fresh fruit and vegetables will help to keep your bowels moving regularly.

### Scar

You should expect to have a scar running lengthways from your breastbone to a point on your midriff, of at least 6 inches (15cm) long. You may also have some stitches in your leg if a vein has been removed to make the graft, or an incision in your arm if a vein has been harvested from there.

### Stitches

If the surgeon has used stitches (or sometimes clips) which don't dissolve, then a nurse at your local doctor's surgery will remove these about 8 to 10 days after the operation. Your surgeon will advise you on exactly when you should have them removed. If you have had chest drains put in, these will be removed 1 or 2 days after your operation and the stitches removed 5 or 6 days later.

### Dressings

It is common for some of the wounds to leak a small amount of fluid in the days after your operation. Your doctor or nurse will apply a small dressing for this. If there is a lot of discharge, a district nurse may visit you at home to change the dressing for you.

Use only soap and water on the affected areas, and keep them clean and dry. You should be able to bathe as normal, but if showering, turn your back to the spray. Try to use water that is not too hot or cold, and don't soak or rub the affected areas until they are completely healed.

### Discomfort

You're bound to feel pain in your chest immediately after surgery, and you may get pain in the surrounding muscles, such as neck and arms. This is normal and usually eases off over the next 3 to 4 weeks.

You may experience discomfort in your chest for a while after the initial healing phase but for most people this will resolve after six months. It is important to continue to use your arms normally during this period as it will help with healing. If a vein has been removed from your leg, you will also have some swelling there, and some patients get pins and needles, or numbness. Your doctor or nurse will make sure you have painkillers to take home with you, and may suggest wearing a support stocking at home. Most people are able to sit up by the second day and can go home in a week or so.

You may experience a loss of appetite, but this will improve.

### Tiredness

Your body is using a lot of energy to heal itself, so you will feel more tired than normal - sometimes it can come upon you suddenly but don't feel that it's going to be that way forever. As your physical activity levels improve you will steadily start to feel less tired.

### Feeling emotional

If you feel upset or emotional in the days and weeks after your operation, don't worry - this is a perfectly normal reaction which many people experience.

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## Things that will help you recover more quickly

If you live alone, and you do not have family or friends close by, organise support in advance - have family or friends come to stay with you for the first few days after surgery if possible.

### Eat healthily

Eating a healthy diet will help to ensure that your body has all the nutrients it needs to heal.

### Stop smoking

By not smoking - even if it's just for the time that you're recovering - you immediately start to improve your circulation and your breathing - not to mention a whole list of other benefits to the heart and lungs.

### Family and friends

Family and friends can give you two important things:

- Practical help with the tasks you might be temporarily unable to do while you recover - such as driving, the weekly shop, or lifting heavier items.
- Keeping your spirits up - the novelty soon wears off being home alone all day, and it's easy to feel isolated by this. Having company can help you to worry less. It's important not to let anxiety set in, as it can become a problem in itself which stands in the way of you getting back to your normal routine.

### Keep a routine

Get up at your normal time in the morning, get dressed and move about the house. If you get tired, you can rest later.

### Build up gradually

Have a go at doing some of the things you'd normally do, but build up gradually. Some suggestions are included in the recovery tracker. Obviously, everyone recovers at a different speed, so not all of the suggestions will be suitable for everybody.

When you're building up your activities, you may feel more tired than normal. If so, stop, and rest until your strength returns.

Plan your activity over the day, set realistic targets and try not to do too much in any one day. With practice you will soon be able to progress your activity and will feel less tired generally. Do listen to your body as it gives lots of clues about how it's coping with new activity levels and with practice you will soon have the skills to grade your activity level without feeling tired.

You are entitled to be assessed and, if it would benefit you, to be offered cardiac rehabilitation. Research has shown that patients that attend cardiac rehab do much better than those that don't. This is more than just advice. It is an ongoing programme, lasting at least 6 weeks, during which heart patients can regain physical strength and self-confidence and discuss changes to their lifestyle with a team of health professionals. Ask your nurse or doctor about how you can get cardiac rehab in your area. If you have already left hospital ask your GP about cardiac rehab.

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## Returning to work

You do not need your GP's permission to go back to work – this is ultimately your decision.

### **Fact: Work can be part of your recovery**

Everyone needs time off to recover after an operation - but too much of it can stand in the way of you getting back to normal. In fact, by staying off for too long, people can become isolated and depressed. Getting back to your normal work routine sooner rather than later can actually help you to recover more quickly.

### **Getting back to work**

How quickly you return to work depends on a number of things:

- How you heal
- How you respond to surgery
- The type of job you do

People whose work involves a lot of heavy lifting, or standing up or walking for long periods of time, will not be able to return to work as quickly as those who have office jobs which are less demanding physically.

### **How soon can I go back?**

Every person recovers differently and has different needs. If you do a job which involves only light physical exertion - i.e., it does not involve you standing for periods of more than 20 minutes, or lifting more than 5kg at a time - you can usually return to work 6-8 weeks after your operation. Most people will find themselves fit to work by two to three months after the operation.

If your employer has an occupational health nurse or doctor they will advise you on this. Alternatively your GP can give you advice. Ultimately, it's your decision when you want to go back, and there's no insurance risk to your employer if you choose to do so.

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## Planning for your return

### 3 golden rules for a speedy recovery:

Stay active.

Keep a normal daily routine.

Keep social contact with people.

Talk to your Occupational Health service or GP to work out when and how is best for you to return to work.

Depending on the nature of your job, you might want to ask your employer about returning to work on lighter duties at first. This means:

- Spending more time sitting rather than standing or walking
- Doing work that is mostly paperwork, using a computer or telephone
- Not carrying more than around 5kg any significant distance
- Avoiding tasks such as prolonged loading or unloading, packing or unpacking.

If you have an HR Department at work, they will be able to advise you on how your absence might affect any benefits you may be receiving during your time off.

Depending on the type of work you do, people who've had a coronary artery bypass graft sometimes find that in the long term, they need to be redeployed into a role which is less strenuous. If you think this is the case, talk to your workplace Occupational Health service.

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## Driving

The law says that you must not drive for 4 weeks after a coronary artery bypass graft; after that point, it's up to you to decide in consultation with your GP when you are fit to drive. Your insurance company should be informed about your operation. Some companies will not insure drivers for a number of weeks after surgery, so it's important to check what your policy says.

If you drive a Class 2 vehicle you are legally obliged to inform the DVLA about your operation and must not drive for 3 months.



### **Driving - an exercise**

Before resuming driving, you should be free from the sedative effects of any painkillers you may be taking. You should be comfortable in the driving position and able to safely control your car, including freely performing an emergency stop. You should practise this in a safe place without putting the key in the ignition. It is advisable not to restart driving with a long journey.

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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
1–2 days	You'll feel groggy from the anaesthetic and very tired. You'll also experience pain in your chest area from the operation, and discomfort in your leg.	By the second day, most patients are able to sit up in bed, and nurses will help you with eating and drinking.		No
2–6 days	Nurses will give you pain relief for your chest and surrounding muscles and your physiotherapist can teach you techniques to reduce discomfort.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exercises to improve your breathing.</li><li>• The nurses and physiotherapist will begin to get you moving around the ward.</li><li>• The nurse or physiotherapist should explain about cardiac rehabilitation and offer to arrange an assessment for you after you have been discharged from the hospital ward phase of your treatment.</li></ul>		No

### When can I have sex?

For many people, being able to have sex again is an important milestone in their recovery. There are no set rules or times about when it's safe to do so other than whether it feels OK to you - treat it like any other physical activity and build up gradually.

### specific print instructions:



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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
1 week	At home, any pain can be controlled with the medication you've been prescribed. It's normal to feel anxious or depressed, but do discuss this with your visiting nurse or doctor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walk around your home. You might feel stiff at first, but getting moving again will help you to recover more quickly.</li> <li>Set aside specific rest times in bed and stick to them. When sitting, raise your legs higher than heart level.</li> </ul>		<b>No</b>
2-4 weeks	You may feel slightly short of breath as your activity levels increase, but this will improve. Avoid activities that put added strain on your heart, particularly after a large meal, and don't lift or push anything too heavy (over 10lb or 5kg in weight).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Steady exercise, particularly walking, is ideal. Rest after a meal and before and after exercise, and keep a good balance between the two.</li> <li>Do your breathing exercises.</li> </ul>		<b>No</b>

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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	How you might feel	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
4–6 weeks	You'll have more energy, but may feel tired towards the end of the day. Any problems with sleeping, memory, or concentration will improve over the coming months.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use the recovery diary to build up your levels of activity slowly and steadily.</li> <li>You may be invited to a cardiac rehabilitation programme, which will include advice on exercise, relaxation and lifestyle, to get you back to as full a life as possible.</li> </ul>	 	<b>Not just yet - but well on the way. Some people will be fit enough to return after 6 weeks.</b>
8–12 weeks	Most patients will be back at work by now. If you have a heavy manual job you may need up to three months in order for your chest to heal properly.	Ask your doctor about beginning a regular exercise programme; you may be eligible for an 'exercise prescription'.	 	<b>Yes, usually after two months</b>

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## Recovery tracker

Days/Weeks Post Op	Things you can do safely	Traffic light	Fit to work?
16 weeks	<p>If you haven't had any complications to do with your surgery, and you're still off work, it's possible that you're feeling anxious about returning to work and could do with a bit of help from your GP and your employer. Talk to them both about a gradual return to work.</p> <p>If you're off for too long, there's a risk of developing problems to do with anxiety, isolation, and lack of confidence. These could affect your quality of life in the long term. Talk to your doctor about how best to avoid this becoming a problem for you.</p>		<b>Yes</b>

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## After you get home

Week	Got up at ... am	Activities (eg walked for ... minutes)	How much rest I needed after each	Went to bed at ... pm	How have I been feeling? Any pain? Emotional feelings?	What do you want to achieve tomorrow?
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						

Remember, take a step-by-step approach to getting better, and build up your activities in small stages. Don't push yourself too far too fast. If you're concerned about anything, or if you feel you're not making progress fast enough, ask your surgeon or call your GP.

### specific print instructions:

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## Keeping well

Because of your operation, the chances are you'll be a lot more aware of your body and how it works.

Right now is a really good time to build on the knowledge you've gained and make small changes to your lifestyle which can prevent you from experiencing certain health problems in the future. You can do this by:

- Improving your diet - get 5 portions of fresh fruit and veg per day.
- Any exercise – the best medical advice suggests that you should try to do 30 minutes of physical activity a day. In the early stages of your recovery even just a few short walks each day really will make a difference to your health.
- Quit smoking - NHS Stop Smoking Services are one of the most effective ways of to stop for good – and they're completely free. Your doctor will be happy to help you.

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## Website links

The internet's a great thing – anything you want to know is there for you at the click of a mouse but, do be careful about the way you use it when it comes to getting information about your health. It's hard to know which sites to trust, and none of them can tell you anything that's specific to your individual medical needs.

If you do want to know more about your operation, recovery or return to work, here is a list of trusted websites that offer safe, sensible, useful information:

[The Royal College of Surgeons of England](http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/)  
<http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/>

[Society for Cardiothoracic Surgery in Great Britain and Ireland](http://scts.org/)  
<http://scts.org/>

[British Heart Foundation](http://www.bhf.org.uk/)  
<http://www.bhf.org.uk/>

[NHS Stop Smoking Service](http://smokefree.nhs.uk/)  
<http://smokefree.nhs.uk/>

[NHS Choices](http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/Homepage.aspx)  
<http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/Homepage.aspx>

[Department for Work and Pensions](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions)  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions>

[GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/)  
<https://www.gov.uk/>

[DVLA - Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency](https://www.gov.uk/browse/driving/disability-health-condition)  
<https://www.gov.uk/browse/driving/disability-health-condition>

Call 111 for nonemergency medical advice