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## **San Francisco General Hospital Chest Reconstruction Surgery Aftercare Instructions**

### **For Urgent Medical Questions:**

Call hospital operator and ask for on-call plastic surgeon 415-206-8000

### **The Night Before Your Surgery**

Do not eat or drink anything after midnight on the night before your surgery date. This is to prevent complications while you are under anesthesia.

## **Post-Operative Care – Your 1<sup>st</sup> Week of Recovery**

### **Dressings and Wound Care**

- You will have a compressive vest or ace bandage over your chest bandages.
- Do not remove the bandage or the wrap. You should keep this on at all times including when you are sleeping. There should be no need to change the dressings or remove the packing or wrap until your surgeon examines you at your first post-operative appointment.
- If the vest is pulled uncomfortably tight and you are experiencing numbness in your arms you can adjust the tension but be sure to keep the vest snug and firm against your body. Compression is essential for nipple graft healing and chest shaping.
- You will be required to wear the compressive vest or ace bandage for up to 6 weeks after your surgery.

### **Drain Care**

You will have 2 drains coming out of the chest bandage. The drains are placed under the skin to prevent fluid from building up in your chest. They will be removed during your postoperative appointment, usually 1 week after surgery.

### **Drain Instructions**

1. The amount of drainage needs to be **recorded**. If your drains are not producing much fluid, do not worry, this is normal. The tubes and bulbs may have air bubbles or small blood clots, this is also normal.
2. The bulbs will need to **be drained every 4-5 hrs in the first 3-4 days after surgery**. You may need to drain the bulbs more often if they fill up sooner. The amount of fluid in the drains should decrease over the course of the week. The drainage should start out bloody, and then lighten to a pinkish then pinkish clear yellow color.
3. **To Drain the Bulbs:**
  - 1) Start by massaging the tubes to loosen up the fluid inside. Make sure to hold the tube securely near the top of the vest.
  - 2) Hold the tube securely where it enters the skin with two fingers of one hand. Take your two fingers from the other hand and pinch the tube gently together while pulling down the tube toward the bulb. This will massage clogs downward and out of the tube into the drain. **MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT PULL OUT THE TUBE**. Seek medical advice from the on-call plastic surgeon if the tube falls out at any time.
  - 3) Drain the bulb by opening the cap and carefully pouring the liquid into a clear plastic medical measuring cup. Record the **date, time, amount, and color**.
  - 4) Flush the fluid down the toilet or sink, do not save it.
  - 5) Squeeze the bulb until your 2 fingers touch. Then re-cap the bulb. This creates the suction needed.  
**DO NOT RINSE OUT THE TUBE OR BULB WITH ANYTHING.**

### **A Note on Nipple Grafts:**

- Depending on your nipple size, you may have nipple grafts as a part of your chest surgery.
- Nipple grafts are made from your original nipples and shaped to be smaller and thinner.
- To minimize complications with nipple grafts the chest area must stay well compressed by the vest or ace bandage. Compression helps healing by allowing small blood vessels to grow more quickly.

- Rubbing, stretching, or pulling all add to stress and strain on grafts and should be avoided. Shirts that buttons or zip are recommended to prevent you from lifting your arms above your head. Arrange your living space ahead of time to keep important items at waist level.
- Additionally, avoiding smoking supports nipple healing.

### Activity

- You will need to rest the first week. You may walk around the house and take short walks as tolerated.
- **Do not raise your arms above your head, do not reach for anything, and limit your arm movements** for the **first 2-3 weeks** after the surgery. Reaching can cause the incisions to pull apart and open.
- If your arms feel swollen, then you can prop them up on a few pillows above the level of your heart while you are lying down.
- **Sleep on your back.** Do not sleep on your side. You must sleep on your back for the next **6 weeks** while your chest heals.
- **Avoid picking anything up greater than 5 lbs** or doing strenuous activities which raise your heart rate for the first 2 weeks.

### Showering

- Do not shower until your surgeon has told you it is okay to do so. Usually the surgeon will recommend that you do not shower until after your first post-operative appointment. Keep your chest bandages on and keep them **dry**. You may **sponge bath** clean your lower body, armpits, hair.

### Medication

- If your doctor or surgeon has recommended that you stop taking any medications before surgery, check back to see when you can begin them again.
- Take the **antibiotic** until it is all gone (as prescribed).
- The **pain medication should be taken as prescribed**. To reduce nausea, take the pain medication with food. If your pain medication is causing you excessive nausea, you may discontinue and use ibuprofen or Tylenol instead. Do not take any Tylenol while on the pain medicine. (Tylenol is also called acetaminophen)

- If you are in severe pain even with the pain medication, contact your doctor or surgeon. Do not take more pain medication without consulting with your doctor.
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages or drive a car while taking the pain medication.

### **Diet**

- Eat light the first 24 hours. Start by drinking clear liquids and work up to bland foods (rice, applesauce).
- If you have nausea stick to a bland diet until you no longer feel sick.
- The pain medicine may be constipating. Drink plenty of fluids – aim for 8-10 glasses of water per day. You may take an over the counter laxative, such as Milk of Magnesia or Dicolax, as needed.

### **CALL FOR MEDICAL ADVICE OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM IF YOU HAVE:**

- **A temperature greater than 101 degrees.**
- **Excessive bright red bleeding** on the dressings.
- **Excessive bloody drainage from the drains** (drains filling with blood completely, and then filling up again shortly after, especially if this has been going on for several hours)
- **Bruising traveling down your side or into your armpit.**
- **Swelling of one side of the chest that feels twice as big as the other side**, this may be a sign of bleeding.
- **Persistent vomiting.**

## Post-Operative Care – Your 2<sup>nd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> Week After Surgery

### Dressings and Wound Care

- You will have tape on your incisions. Leave the tape on until it peels off on its own.
- After your dressings are removed, you may shower the next day.
  - **Do not face the shower** because this may damage the nipple grafts.
  - Let the shower hit your back and run over the front of your chest.
  - **Do not scrub your nipple grafts.**
  - When getting out of the shower, pat yourself dry with a clean towel and then immediately place new dressings on the nipple grafts as described below.

**NIPPLE DRESSINGS** should be changed once a day for three weeks.

- a. Cover each nipple graft with a square of gauze and Neosporin ointment.
- b. Then cover this with gauze or a Large Square Band-Aid dressing.
- c. This must be done after you shower at least once a day.
- d. After about 3 weeks your nipple grafts should be completely healed and you can stop the dressing changes.
- e. It is not unusual for the center of the nipple graft to take the longest to heal. If the center of the nipple looks like a hole or “crater”, don’t worry; just continue with the dressing and this will eventually fill in.

**DRAIN HOLES** at the end of the incision should be covered with a bandage and antibiotic ointment once a day for one week.

### Activity

- Continue to limit your arm movements and avoid straining your arms and chest for at least 6 weeks after surgery.
- Continue to sleep on your back for 6 weeks after surgery.
- **Avoid picking anything up greater than 5 lbs** or doing strenuous activities which raise your heart rate for the first 2 weeks. After 2 weeks, you can begin moderate aerobic exercise and lift up to 20 pounds. Strenuous exercise can typically begin between 6-8 weeks after surgery. Individual healing times will vary. Check with your surgeon before engaging in exercise after surgery.
- Avoid hot tubs for 6 months after surgery

### **Scar Care**

- **You may start silicone sheets to minimize scars starting 6 weeks after the surgery date.** Only use this on your incisions, **not** the nipple grafts.
- Avoid sunburn and prolonged sun exposure on the chest for at least 1 year after surgery. Use strong sunscreen on the incision sites and grafts.
- Scars take up to 2 years to fade. After 2 years there will usually not be any change to the appearance of the scar without additional intervention.

### **Additional Notes on Healing**

- It is normal to have swelling up to 3 months after surgery. Most signs of “dog ears” or puffiness of the central chest will disappear after the swelling has completely dissipated.