



What Happens After Heart Surgery?

After your surgery, a team of specially-trained health care professionals gives you 24-hour care. This will happen while you are in the intensive care unit (ICU).

Their goal is to make sure you have a safe and smooth recovery. They will use machines to constantly monitor your vital signs. And they also may give you special treatments.



In the ICU, you will be watched closely by a team of highly-trained health care professionals.

What is the ICU like?

When you wake up, you might feel confused and lose track of time. But it's normal. The ICU can also be noisy and busy.

Your health care team will monitor your heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and other important vital signs.

The equipment that may be used to monitor you or assist in your recovery in the ICU includes:

- **ECG or EKG (electrocardiogram)** — Tiny wires, or electrodes, are taped to your arms or shoulder and chest to record your heartbeat. Your health care team monitors it at all times to tell if your heart is beating normally.
- **Arterial line** — A catheter is placed in an artery, usually on the inside of your arm. It monitors your blood pressure and takes blood samples to measure the oxygen levels in your blood and other tests.
- **Swan-Ganz catheter** — Measures heart and pulmonary artery pressures and blood flow. It's inserted through a neck vein.

- **Chest tubes** — Drain fluid (including blood) from around the heart after surgery to prevent buildup inside your chest. You'll likely get medication to help you relax when the tubes are taken out. You may feel some discomfort.
- **Breathing tube** — This helps with your breathing during and shortly after surgery. You can't talk, eat or drink while the tube supports your breathing. It's uncomfortable, but it's usually removed within hours after surgery.

You may stay in the ICU for a few days depending on the type of surgery you had and your recovery time. Afterward, you may move to a regular hospital room.

What should I expect from my hospital stay?

- **Moving in bed** — You'll sit in a chair and walk with help soon after surgery. Your activity will increase each day.
- **Breathing exercises** — They help remove fluid from your lungs. Deep breaths and gentle coughing might be uncomfortable but won't harm your incision.

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- **Drinking and eating** — You can start drinking fluids the day after surgery and eat regular food when you're ready. Salt may be limited.
- **Elastic stockings** — They help with leg circulation when you're not active.
- **Bathing** — Usually within a few days after surgery, you can take a shower with a nurse nearby.
- **Removing stitches** — If you have external stitches or staples, they'll be removed in about a week.
- **Getting stronger** — You'll feel better and stronger each day, but it's normal to tire easily.
- **Medication** — You'll be given medications to help with pain and prevent blood clots or abnormal heart rhythms.

What should my family know?

A few hours after surgery, your close family can visit you briefly in the ICU. Once you leave the ICU, your family can visit you in the hospital during visiting hours.

Your health care team will keep you and your family informed about your progress.



HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or visit [heart.org](https://www.heart.org) to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at [HeartInsight.org](https://www.heartinsight.org).
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at [heart.org/SupportNetwork](https://www.heart.org/SupportNetwork).

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write your own questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

When will I leave the ICU?

How long will the breathing tube stay in?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk for heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit [heart.org/AnswersByHeart](https://www.heart.org/AnswersByHeart) to learn more.