

Activity After a Heart Attack

How soon can I get back to my regular activities?

Most people can return to work and the activities they enjoy within a few months of having a heart attack. Others may have to limit their activity somewhat if their heart muscle is very weak. The amount of activity you can do will be based on the condition of your heart. Your doctor will work with you to develop a recovery plan.

You will need to start slowly. For the first few days after your heart attack, you may need to rest and let your heart heal. As your heart heals, you'll be ready to start moving around again. A few days after your heart attack, your doctor may want you to move around more. You may do stretching exercises and get up and walk. You'll then slowly become more active based on advice from your doctor.

Once you've gotten through the early period after a heart attack, your doctor may talk to you about how to be active within your limits. Your doctor will probably want you to do an exercise test, also called a stress test. During this test, your doctor will ask you to exercise (usually walking on a treadmill) while he or she monitors your heart. Based on the results, your doctor will develop an exercise plan for you.

Your doctor may also recommend that you get involved in a rehabilitation program. Rehabilitation programs are supervised by exercise specialists. Many hospitals sponsor these to get people started with a safe level of exercise after a heart attack. After a while, you'll probably be able to exercise on your own. If you have any of the symptoms listed below, call your doctor. You may be working too hard.

Why is exercise so important?

Exercise strengthens your heart muscle. It can also help you feel more energetic, help you feel more in control of your health and help you lose weight and keep it off. Exercise may also lower your blood pressure and reduce your cholesterol level.

What kind of exercise is good?

The best types of exercise are those that involve your whole body, such as walking, cycling, jogging, rowing, cross-country skiing or swimming. Your doctor and rehabilitation therapists may also prescribe activities to increase your strength and flexibility.

Exercise alert!

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following symptoms during exercise:

- Shortness of breath for more than about 10 minutes
- Chest pain or pain in your arms, neck, jaw or stomach
- Dizzy spells
- Pale or splotchy skin
- Very fast heartbeat or an irregular heartbeat
- Cold sweats
- Nausea and Vomiting
- Weakness, swelling or pain in your legs

What can I do to speed my recovery and stay healthy?

Your doctor will probably recommend that you make some changes in your diet, such as cutting back on fat and cholesterol and watching your salt intake. If you smoke, you will have to quit. Your doctor may also suggest that you learn better ways to deal with stress, such as relaxation training and deep breathing.

When can I go back to work?

Most people go back to work within one to three months after having a heart attack. The amount of time you stay off from work depends on the condition of your heart and how strenuous your work is. You may have to make some changes in how you do your job or you may have to change jobs - at least for a short time - if your job is too hard on your heart.

What about sex?

You can probably start having sex again in three to four weeks after your heart attack. As with other types of activity, you may need to start out slowly and work your way back into your normal patterns.

Don't be afraid of sex because of your heart attack. Try different positions if one position seems to make you uncomfortable. Let your partner be on top to reduce the amount of energy you use during sex. Talk with your doctor and partner if you have any concerns.

Risk factors for another heart attack

Taking charge of the things that put you at risk for another heart attack (see the list below) can help you feel better and reduce your risk of future problems.

- Not exercising
- Being overweight
- High cholesterol level
- High blood sugar level if you have diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- Too much stress in your life