



RECOVERING FROM A HEART ATTACK

Patient Information

Rehabilitation after a heart attack begins in the hospital, but it continues for 3 months after the patient goes home. For many people, rehabilitation means making some permanent changes toward leading a healthier life. These include not smoking, losing weight if you are overweight, eating a healthy low-cholesterol, low-fat diet, and avoiding stress. Your doctor will prescribe an exercise program to encourage healing. If you also have high blood pressure, a low-sodium diet may be recommended.

Many people do not require any medications after a heart attack. However, drugs may be prescribed for other conditions that may be related, such as angina, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol level, or irregular heart beats (dysrhythmias). Since some studies report that aspirin reduces the chance of heart attacks, your doctor may recommend that you take aspirin. If medications are prescribed, take them exactly as ordered. Do not take any medications, not even over-the-counter drugs without first consulting your doctor.

A heart attack is a frightening event. Many people believe that because they survived this life-threatening experience, they have been given a second chance at life. As a result, they learn to slow down and do things they enjoy. You, too, may find yourself thinking about your life-style and making some important changes during the rehabilitation period.

Activity

Your first week at home should be quiet - no visitors, no work, and no telephone calls. During the first 2 - 3 weeks after leaving the hospital, socializing should be limited to a few brief visits with friends in your home. Usually after the third week, you can begin to go out for short visits.

About 6 - 8 weeks after a heart attack marks the next phase of your recovery - the gradual return to normal activity. You can usually begin driving for short distances, but avoid heavy traffic or other stressful situations. If your job is not physically demanding, your doctor may allow you to start back to work for 1 - 2 hours a day. By adding an hour or two each week, you will be working full-time by the end of a month. However, you should limit yourself to no more than 8 hours a day for at least 6 months, and you should not take any additional responsibilities.

If your job is physically demanding, it may be 3 - 4 months before you can resume work full-time. It may be advisable to make a job change, particularly if your work involves heavy lifting, long hours, or considerable stress. Heavy lifting or pushing is not permitted. Avoid picking up anything that weighs more than 10 pounds.

A graduated walking program is an important part of recovery for most patients. Your doctor will prescribe a home exercise program, just as he/she prescribes any other treatment.

Sexual activity

Many heart attack patients and their spouses worry that sexual activity will bring on another heart attack. Actually, a heart attack during or after sexual intercourse occurs no more often than after any other normal activity. Sexual activity can be resumed once healing is under way. For most patients, this means refraining from sexual intercourse for at least 2 - 4 weeks after leaving the hospital. However, this depends on the severity of your heart attack, so ask your physician.

A few heart attack patients experience chest pain (angina) during intercourse. Changing positions so that less tension is placed on the chest muscles may relieve this problem. Lying side-by-side with your partner or lying on the bottom with your partner on top may be more comfortable. Your doctor may recommend taking nitroglycerine beforehand.

Smoking

Nicotine causes the blood vessels to constrict, slows the healing process, and may cause chest pain. Smoking or chewing tobacco places an extra workload on the heart, forcing the heart to pump harder. It also interferes with the blood's ability to deliver oxygen to the body's tissues, especially the myocardium. If you were a smoker at the time of your heart attack, here is some good news: since you have not been allowed to smoke while you were in the hospital, you already have a head start on giving it up for good. **Do NOT start again.**

Symptoms to report

Notify your doctor if you have any symptoms that could mean heart distress. These include chest pain that is not relieved by rest or taking a nitroglycerine tablet, rapid heartbeats, shortness of breath, extreme fatigue, dizziness, light-headedness, or fainting.