

Going Home after Your Heart Attack

Following a heart attack, which is often unexpected, life can suddenly change. Now you are looking to find the “*new normal*” to your life. You are probably wondering what you can and can not do when you get home from the hospital.

Going Home after Your Heart Attack

Your heart attack has caused sudden, drastic changes in your life. Now that you are going home from the hospital, you need to find out the “new normal” for your life. You may be wondering what you can and can’t do once you get home. We hope that this resource will help to answer some of your questions and help you get back on track and resume a normal lifestyle as soon as possible.

During the recovery time after a heart attack (the next 4-6 weeks); your heart muscle is healing. You must be careful that you don’t do too much. As your energy levels increase, you should be able to enjoy doing many of the things you did before your heart attack.

How Soon Can I Drive?

You should not drive your own personal vehicle for up to 1 month after a heart attack. If driving is part of your job (for example, a taxi driver), you should not resume driving for up to 3 months. Please talk to your doctor about driving because your health condition may change during this time. These driving recommendations are supported by the Alberta Motor Association, the Alberta Government, and the Canadian Cardiovascular Society.

When Can I Return To Work?

Talk with your doctor about when you can go back to work. Most people need to be off work for at least one month. However, this may vary depending on your own health situation and the type of work that you do.

Is It Ok To Travel?

Talk with your doctor before you make any travel plans. It is not usually a good idea to fly for 4-6 weeks after a heart attack. If you are planning a trip where it is important to have medical insurance, talk to your insurance company to make sure you have enough coverage. The amount of coverage that you need may change after a major health event like a heart attack.

When Is It Safe To Return To Sexual Activity?

Sexual activity can be resumed gradually after about 2 weeks at home. If you can walk up 2 flights of stairs without discomfort or take a brisk walk around the block without becoming short of breath, you can usually have sex safely. Before sexual activity, make sure you feel well-rested, comfortable, have waited at least 1 hour after eating and do not feel emotionally upset..

If I Have Stairs At Home, Can I Use Them?

Use stairs only when you have to. You may only be able to take a few steps at a time and need to rest before finishing the flight. Do not carry anything up and down the stairs during your recovery time. Do not use stairs for exercise.

At Times I Feel Angry Or Sad. Sometimes I Do Not Even Believe That I Have Had A Heart Attack. Is This Normal?

After your heart attack, you need to heal - both physically and emotionally. You may have feelings like shock, denial, fear, anger, or sadness. This is normal during your recovery. It is good to pay attention to these feelings and talk about them with someone you trust. As you get stronger, these feelings will lessen. If you experience continued sadness, poor appetite, poor sleep, and a lack of energy and motivation, you could be depressed. Depression can prevent you from fully recovering from your heart attack. Talk to your doctor if you think you might be depressed.

Emotional Energy

Visiting can tire you out! Limit visits to family members and close friends for the first while. Limit the length of outings to 1-2 hours. Make sure you feel well-rested before going out.

Can I Drink Alcohol?

You will be taking some new medications when you leave the hospital and your body needs time to adjust to them. It is important to wait a few weeks to see how you feel on these new medications before you have a drink with alcohol. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist to see if alcohol will affect how your medications work. Too much alcohol can weaken the pumping action of your heart, raise your blood pressure and increase the fats (triglycerides) in your blood.

Limit your alcohol intake to no more than 2 servings a day for men and 1 serving per day for women. (1 serving = 1 bottle (12 ounces) of beer, 5 ounces of wine, 1.5 ounces of liquor)

I Love My Morning Coffee. Can I Still Have It?

The caffeine in coffee makes your heart beat faster. If you have ever had a rapid, irregular heartbeat, you should avoid coffee or other sources of caffeine. Otherwise, you may drink coffee in moderation – no more than 3 cups per day. (1 cup = 8 ounces) Remember caffeine can also be found in tea, chocolate, and pop.

Finances And Community Resources – What Is Available?

You might be worried about finances after your heart attack. A social worker can talk with you about these concerns and help you explore your options. If you do not have a private insurance plan or sick benefits through your work, you might be able to receive one of the following:

medical benefits through Employment Insurance

Canada Pension Plan disability

Alberta Works Income Assistance

Medications

If your doctor prescribes some medication and you do not have a medical insurance plan, a social worker can help you to explore options like:

Alberta Blue Cross non-group coverage

subsidy for Blue Cross insurance premiums that may be available

Alberta Adult Health Benefit Program (Alberta Works)

When I Leave The Hospital, Are There Programs That Can Help Me?

After you have time to recover, we suggest that you start a “cardiac rehabilitation program”. These programs offer classes where you can learn more about heart health, as well as exercise sessions that are supervised by health care professionals. The exercise sessions will help you get into the best physical shape possible, plus build your confidence and help you return to a lifestyle as normal as possible. It’s good to get your family involved too! Program support is available if you need it. These cardiac rehabilitation programs are available at the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital (call 780-735-8206) or the Grey Nuns Hospital (call 780-735-7738). Other communities in Alberta have similar programs. Your cardiac healthcare team will talk about these programs with you before you leave the hospital.

Who Do I Follow Up With After I’m Discharged?

Your cardiologist will let you know when you need to be seen for follow-up. It is also important to see your family doctor 1-2 weeks after you come home. If you don’t have a family doctor, you can find out the names of doctors taking new patients by calling Alberta Health Services HealthLink at 1-866-408-5465. Or, you can visit this website www.albertahealthservices.ca.

Activities After a Heart Attack

Your goal over the next 4 weeks is to slowly increase your level of physical activity while letting your heart heal. Your energy will gradually improve and, in most cases, you will be able to do many of the same things that you did before your heart attack. Start building upon the level of activity you were able to do while you were in the hospital. This will depend on the damage that was done to your heart, your overall health and how fit you were before your heart attack. Always start out with light activities and gradually work up to a moderate level.

Light	Moderate
light housework - dusting, tidying, dishes,	raking leaves
meal preparation	mowing the lawn (no hills)
self care - bathing or showering,	vacuuming
setting hair	washing floors with a mop
grocery shopping	easy dancing
handicrafts - needlecraft, light woodwork	golfing
easy gardening	stationary bike with some tension
fishing	moderate paced walking
light walking (level ground)	
stationary bike (no tension)	
treadmill (no elevation)	

Do not take part in vigorous activities until you have seen your specialist or completed the Cardiac Rehab program. (list examples of vigorous activities)

Safety Tips For The First 4 Weeks After a Heart Attack

- Rest often – plan for 20 minute periods of rest or even longer, depending on how you feel
- Pace yourself – plan your activities, break a big task down into smaller parts, do not push yourself to finish a task
- Avoid long periods of activity that require you to raise your arms overhead, such as washing windows or painting
- Do not exert yourself during weather temperature extremes – heat or cold
- Avoid saunas and hot tubs
- Do not exercise right away after a meal – allow 30 minutes to 1 hour to rest after eating
- Do not lift anything that weighs more than 15-20 lbs.

How to Begin an Exercise Program

Walking is the best kind of exercise for people recovering from a heart attack. You can walk anywhere – in your neighborhood, parks, and shopping malls. You can even walk while you are on vacation! Begin a walking program within a couple of days after coming home from the hospital, unless your doctor tells you not to.

How OFTEN Should You Walk?

- start with a short walk 2-3 times a day
- walk at least 5 days of the week
- take 2 days off each week from exercise, but don't take them in a row
- shorter walks more often can be more comfortable if you have arthritis, joint or back pain

How FAST should you go?

- walk at a “comfortable” pace, which means you should be able to walk and carry on a conversation (“walk and talk”) without becoming short of breath

How LONG should you walk/exercise?

- begin with 5, 10 or even 15 minutes each time, depending on how you feel
- if you can easily walk for a certain length of time, gradually increase the time every 2 or 3 days by a few minutes
- work towards gradually increasing your walking to 30-45 minutes most days of the week
- as you build up the strength to walk for longer stretches of time, you may want to break up the walking time into 2 parts – for example walk for 20 minutes in the morning and another 20 minutes in the evening

How can you tell if you are OVERDOING your exercise?

- symptoms of angina (chest pain), muscle aches, being short of breath, fatigue or lightheadedness during periods of physical activity
- not being able to “walk and talk” – you should be able to walk and talk comfortably without becoming short of breath

EXAMPLE OF A WALKING SCHEDULE FOR YOUR RECOVERY PERIOD

Week	1	2	3	4
Minutes	5-10	10-20	15-30	20-40

**Gradually increase your time by a few minutes every 2 to 3 day*

Watch For Warning Signs!

If you feel any of these symptoms, STOP what you are doing and rest!

- angina – feelings of tightness, pressure or burning in your chest, arms, back,
- Jaw, neck
- weakness, lightheadedness or dizziness
- pounding heart or palpitations
- shortness of breath or running out of breath

If you have angina, take your nitroglycerin as instructed. If the angina lasts, call 911!

BORG RPE Scale

It is important to pay attention to how the exercise makes you feel. **The Borg Scale (RPE=rating of perceived exertion scale)** is a way of measuring your level of activity. You should aim for the **10 to 12 level** during your recovery phase.

RPE Scale	Talk Test
6	Resting
7 - very, very light	
8	
9 - very light	Would be able to sing
10	
11 - fairly light	
12	Would be able to talk comfortably
13 - somewhat hard	
14	Talking more than 4 to 6 words may be difficult
15 - hard	
16	Talking more than 2 to 3 word may be difficult
17 - very hard	
18	Talking one word may be difficult
19 - very, very hard	
20	Maximum effort

If you are unable to say more than 4 to 6 words at a time, you are working too hard and need to cut back on your pace.

Exercising within a **10 to 12 RPE** range means that you are able to talk comfortably in sentences. This range should be your goal during your 4 week recovery period.

Final Tips about Exercise

- exercise only when you feel well - wait at least 2 days until the last symptoms of a cold or flu bug have gone away
- wear comfortable clothing and footwear
- carry a cell phone
- let someone know where and when you will be walking
- walk with a friend– it is fun to walk with someone else and their health will benefit too!

References

- Canadian Guidelines for Cardiac Rehabilitation & Cardiovascular Prevention 3rd edition 2009
- Canadian Cardiovascular Society -Assessment of the Cardiac Patient for Fitness to Drive and Fly 2003
- Canadian Diabetic Association 2008 Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Diabetes in Canada
- Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada
- Health Canada

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