

Heart information



Physical activity after heart attack and heart surgery



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How will physical activity help me?

It is important to be active after a heart attack or heart surgery. Enjoying regular, light- to moderate-intensity physical activity with friends and family or as part of a recovery program will help you to stay healthy and reduce your risk of more heart problems.

People with heart disease can still benefit from regular, moderate-intensity physical activity. Not everyone who is physically active will get all of the benefits at once, or all of the same benefits. But most of the benefits listed below can come from regular physical activity – even if you have heart disease.

If you are regularly physically active you:

- recover better from a heart attack or other heart problems
- reduce your risk of more heart problems
- improve your long-term health
- feel more confident, happy and relaxed
- manage your weight more easily
- have a healthier cholesterol
- have lower blood pressure
- have stronger bones (reduce osteoporosis).

If you have diabetes, regular physical activity will help you to manage your blood glucose levels.

Did you know?

If you've recently had a heart attack or heart surgery, physical activity will play an important part in your recovery.





When can I start doing physical activity?

Most people recover their strength quickly after a heart attack or heart surgery. You can start doing a range of normal daily activities from two to four weeks after your heart attack or heart surgery.

It's important that you stick to the physical activity program you started while you were in hospital. Talk to your doctor or cardiac rehabilitation health professional about when you can start various activities again and how to build up your physical activity program. In a matter of weeks you should be able to do whatever you were able to do before.

When you have recovered, keep doing regular physical activity. This is an important part of your recovery and should continue to be an important part of your life.

What physical activity can I do?

Take part in activities that you enjoy and want to do regularly. You could start with walking and everyday tasks, such as light gardening and housework, and gradually build up to sport, such as cycling and swimming.

If you don't do any physical activity one day, that's ok. Just start again the next day.

If you don't do any physical activity for a week or more, that's ok too. But when you start again, you need to start at a lower level of intensity and build up slowly so that you don't overdo it or injure yourself.

An important note

Following open-heart surgery, allow at least six weeks before engaging in more strenuous upper arm activities, including swimming.

Walking

Walking is a good physical activity to start doing after a heart attack or heart surgery because it is gentle on your body, you can go at your own pace and you can walk and talk with other people. Once you are feeling up to it, you may want to join your local Heart Foundation Walking group to keep fit and make new friends in your area.

Remember to start slowly.

- Do a bit of easy walking around your house and garden, or out on your street.
- Start by walking on flat ground each day.
- Have a destination, such as the local shop or the end of the block, in mind.
- Walk at a pace that's comfortable for you.
- Build up gradually over a period of weeks to walking longer distances, and then try going uphill.

The guidelines below encourage you to start walking in the first week after you leave hospital and provide recommendations on how this can be built up gradually over time.

Guidelines for walking after you leave hospital

Week	Minimum time (minutes)	Times per day	Pace
1	5–10	2	Stroll
2	10–15	2	Comfortable
3	15–20	2	Comfortable
4	20–25	1–2	Comfortable/Stride out
5	25–30	1–2	Comfortable/Stride out
6	30	1–2	Comfortable/Stride out

What about walking up stairs?

Increase stair climbing gradually. If there are stairs where you live, there is no reason why you shouldn't climb them slowly as soon as you come home. As a general rule, if you can walk normally at your usual pace, you can also climb two flights of stairs at your usual pace.





Sport

After a heart attack, you can usually go back to cycling, swimming, tennis, golf and bowls after six weeks. Ask your doctor or cardiac rehabilitation health professional about specific sports.

Lifting heavy weights and straining can raise your blood pressure and should be avoided. But resistance training with light weights can be part of a healthy physical activity program. Talk to your doctor or cardiac rehabilitation health professional before you start a resistance training program.

Resuming sex

Most people can have sex soon after a heart attack. If you can walk up two flights of stairs without getting chest pain or shortness of breath, you will probably be able to cope with the amount of energy required for sex. Avoid having sex after eating a large meal, drinking alcohol or when you are very tired.

We recommend that people who have had bypass surgery wait until their breastbone has healed (approximately six to eight weeks after the operation). You may find that some positions are more comfortable than others, because of the discomfort in your chest wound. Remember to stop any activity, including intercourse, if you feel any pain or discomfort in your chest.

It can take time for sexual relationships to get back to normal after a heart attack or heart surgery, so try to take things slowly. Some short-term lack of interest in sex is common after a heart attack. Some heart medicines can also affect your sexual interest or capacity. Make an effort to discuss your feelings and concerns with your partner or doctor.

Is physical activity safe?

Over a lifetime it's more dangerous to be sedentary than to be active regularly. This is also true if you have heart disease, as long as you don't overdo things.

We've all heard of apparently fit people dying of a heart attack while doing physical activity. Often these people didn't know they had heart disease and the physical activity they were doing was too intensive. However, these cases are rare.

It is much more common for you to injure your muscles and joints than for you to have a heart attack during physical activity. Muscle and joint injuries can be avoided by choosing the right kind of physical activity for you and not overdoing it.

If you do injure yourself, cut down on the amount of physical activity that you are doing and if necessary, see a doctor. After an injury, start doing physical activity again when you're able to. When you do start again, start at a lower level of intensity and build up slowly.

Ask your doctor or cardiac rehabilitation health professional for more advice.

Safety tips

- Start any physical activity at a low level of intensity. If you want to do more intensive physical activity, build up slowly over a number of weeks.
- Be active when you're feeling well.
- Don't overdo it.
- Avoid physical activity if you feel unwell, tired or sore from previous activity.
- Don't do physical activity straight after meals or alcohol.
- Be active within comfortable limits – you should never find physical activity 'hard'.
- Drink lots of water during and after physical activity (you will lose water through sweating).
- If you want to begin a program of more intensive physical activity or start to do competitive sports, talk to your doctor.
- If your doctor has prescribed medicines to relieve your angina, take this medicine with you when you are doing physical activity.



Want to speak
with a health
professional? Call
1300 36 27 87



Angina

Angina is a temporary chest discomfort or pain that usually happens during physical activity or extreme emotion and goes away after a few minutes of rest. It happens when part of your heart muscle is temporarily not able to get enough blood and oxygen to meet its needs. Angina symptoms can usually be effectively relieved by putting a dose of your angina medicine (nitrate spray or tablet prescribed by your doctor) under your tongue.

What to do if you have angina

1 As soon as you get an episode of angina → **Immediately stop and rest.**

2 If rest alone does not bring rapid or effective relief → **Take a dose of your angina medicine.**

Make sure that you are sitting or lying down before using your tablet or spray, because they can cause dizziness. It is best to find the smallest dose that usually works for you (e.g. a full tablet, a half or even a quarter).

Tablets: place the tablet under your tongue – do not swallow. After your angina has been relieved, you may spit out what is left of the tablet.

Spray: one spray under the tongue will relieve angina quickly in most people.

3 If the angina is not relieved within five minutes → **Take another dose of your angina medicine.**

4 If the angina

- is not completely relieved by rest and medicine within 10 minutes of onset **or**
- is severe **or**
- gets worse quickly

Call Triple Zero (000)* and ask for an ambulance. Don't hang up. Wait for advice from the 000 operator.

If it is a heart attack, getting to hospital quickly can reduce the damage to your heart and increase your chance of survival. Don't ignore the warning signs! Get help fast. Every minute counts. If it turns out that you did not have a heart attack, it is better to have made sure.

*If calling 000 does not work on your mobile phone, try 112.

Have you got questions? Speak with a health professional. Call 1300 36 2787

How much physical activity should I do?

How you feel is the best guide to what the safe level of physical activity is for you. However, the more physical activity you can do, the better.

It's important to remain active and continue your everyday activities, such as getting dressed each morning and doing light housework and gardening.

We recommend that over time you build up to 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity (such as brisk walking) on most, if not all, days of the week. This activity can be accumulated in shorter bouts, such as three 10-minute walks, if it's easier.

Take it slow

From the beginning, increase your activity very gradually. Continue to follow the advice and guidelines given to you when you left hospital. In particular, follow the walking guidelines that are suggested on page 4.

- Find the level of activity that suits you.
- Aim always to be comfortable while exercising.
- You should never feel that your activity is difficult.
- You should be able to talk without getting short of breath while you're doing physical activity.
- If your previous day's physical activity has left you tired and sore, have a day off to recover.

Heart attack

The warning signs of heart attack include tightness, pressure, heaviness or pain in one or more of your chest, neck, jaw, shoulder/s, back or arm/s. This pain or discomfort may start in your chest and spread to these other areas of your upper body. You may not get chest pain at all but just feel pain or discomfort in one or more of these other areas. You may also feel short of breath, break out in a cold sweat, experience nausea, and/or feel dizzy or light-headed.

Warning signs usually last for at least 10 minutes and vary from person to person. If you experience any of these warning signs, call Triple Zero (000) and ask for an ambulance. If calling 000 doesn't work on your mobile phone, try 112.

Remember

Regular, moderate-intensity physical activity is a vital part of your return to everyday life.



How do I start?

There are a lot of different ways that you can start including physical activity in your day, such as:

- take the stairs instead of the lift
- be active with a friend or in a walking group – join your local Heart Foundation Walking group
- walk an extra bus stop before work
- walk to the local milk bar, shop or train station rather than driving
- sign up for lunchtime activities at work.

When you start doing physical activity, make sure that you wear clothes and shoes to suit the weather and the activity.

Am I too old to start?

No. Physical activity is good for you at any age. Even if you start to do regular physical activity at middle age or older, you will still reduce your risk of more heart problems.



Cardiac rehabilitation

The National Heart Foundation of Australia and the World Health Organization recommend that all patients who have had a heart attack, heart surgery, coronary angioplasty or other heart or blood vessel disease attend an appropriate cardiac rehabilitation and prevention program.

Some hospitals, community health centres and divisions of general practice run outpatient cardiac rehabilitation programs. These programs continue the gradual increase in physical activity that you began in hospital and provide you and your family with education, information and support. You should attend a cardiac rehabilitation program as soon as possible after hospital discharge.

The right rehabilitation program will help most people to reduce their risk of further heart problems.



Will regular physical activity mean I won't have another heart attack?

No. Regular physical activity is only part of the story.

The best ways to reduce your risk of more heart problems are to:

- take your medicines as prescribed
- be smoke-free
- enjoy healthy eating
- be physically active
- manage your blood pressure and cholesterol
- achieve and maintain a healthy body weight
- maintain your psychological and social health.

People with diabetes should generally aim to maintain their blood glucose levels within the normal non-diabetic range and follow individual advice from their doctor or accredited diabetic educator.

Quick tip

Small changes in your lifestyle can make all the difference.

Still have questions? Call
1300 36 27 87





For heart health information
1300 36 27 87
www.heartfoundation.org.au

Key points to remember about physical activity after heart attack and surgery

If you've recently had a heart attack or heart surgery, physical activity will play an important part in your recovery.

Start any physical activity at a low level of intensity. If you want to do more intensive physical activity, build up slowly over a number of weeks.

Physical activity is good for you at any age.

How you feel is the best guide to what the safe level of physical activity is for you.

The right recovery program will help most people to reduce their risk of further heart problems.

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ISBN 978-1-921748-08-0

CON-015.v3

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