

Heart Disease: How to Manage Your Life After a Heart Attack



After a heart attack, you probably have concerns about your health. But you can start doing things now to improve your health and prevent another heart attack.

Medicines and healthy lifestyle changes can help you prevent another heart attack. A healthy lifestyle means being active, eating a heart-healthy diet, and controlling your blood pressure and cholesterol.

Your doctor may recommend a cardiac rehabilitation program. This will help you recover and improve your health. You will learn how to exercise safely, change your diet, deal with stress, and return to your daily activities.

Medicines

Certain medicines can lower your risk of having another heart attack. Your doctor can help you decide which ones are best for you.

- Beta-blockers help lower your blood pressure and prevent another heart attack.

- ACE (angiotensin-converting enzyme) inhibitors help lower your blood pressure and may lower your risk of another heart attack.
- Aspirin and other medicines, such as clopidogrel, help prevent blood clots. This lowers your risk of a heart attack or stroke.
- Statins help lower your cholesterol, which can help prevent another heart attack.

Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

Know your numbers

If you have high blood pressure or high cholesterol, your risk of having another heart attack goes up. So it is important to get your blood pressure and cholesterol checked. Ask your doctor how often you should get tested.

High blood pressure

Your blood pressure reading is given as two numbers. You have high blood pressure if your blood pressure is 130 over 80 or above. This means:

- Your top number (systolic) is 130 or higher.
- Your bottom number (diastolic) is 80 or higher.

You can lower your blood pressure by staying active, eating a heart-healthy diet, and taking medicines, such as beta-blockers.

High cholesterol

LDL (low-density lipoprotein) is called "bad" cholesterol because it narrows your arteries.

An LDL of less than 100 is usually recommended. But after you've had a heart attack, your doctor may want your LDL to be lower than 70. You can find out your levels by

taking a blood test, such as a lipid profile.
Discuss your cholesterol goals with your doctor.

You can improve your cholesterol by eating a heart-healthy diet, staying active, and taking statins or other medicines.

Lifestyle changes

Healthy lifestyle changes can help prevent another heart attack:

- Quit smoking, and avoid secondhand smoke. This is one of the best things you can do for your heart and your overall health.
- Stay active. Physical activity, like walking, can help you lose weight, lower your blood pressure, and improve your cholesterol. Before starting activity, talk to your doctor to find out how much is safe for you. Increase your activity a little bit at a time, as your doctor approves.
- Eat a heart-healthy diet. This includes plenty of fruits and vegetables, fish, and high-fiber grains and breads. Eat foods low in sodium (salt), saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol.
- Cut down on stress. Stress may damage your heart, and it can trigger a heart attack.
- Avoid getting sick from the flu. Get the flu vaccine every year.

When to call for help

Call 911 if you have symptoms of a heart attack, such as:

- Chest pain or pressure.
- Sweating.
- Shortness of breath.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in the back, neck, jaw, or upper belly or in one or both shoulders or arms.
- Lightheadedness or sudden weakness.
- A fast or irregular heartbeat.
- You have been diagnosed with angina, and you have chest pain that does not go away with rest or is not getting better within 5 minutes after you take a dose of nitroglycerin.

After you call 911, the operator may tell you to chew 1 adult-strength or 2 to 4 low-dose aspirin. Wait for an ambulance. Do not try to drive yourself.

Call 911 if you have signs of a stroke, such as:

- Sudden numbness, paralysis, or weakness in your face, arm, or leg, especially on only one side of your body.
- New problems with walking or balance.
- Sudden vision changes.
- Drooling or slurred speech.
- New problems speaking or understanding simple statements, or feeling confused.
- A sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches.