



Heart Attack

What is it?

The heart muscle is a living tissue that needs oxygen and nutrients to function. Most heart attacks (known medically as myocardial infarction) happen when blood flow to the heart muscle is suddenly cut off – starving a part of the heart muscle. In general, heart attack occurs when a clot forms on a ruptured cholesterol plaque in the coronary artery, in turn blocking the blood supply.

8 Tips for Staying Heart Healthy after a Heart Attack

If you've had a heart attack, you know how scary it is. You also know how important it is to stay heart healthy to help prevent another one. Here are some quick tips to help:

1. If you smoke, stop. If you were a smoker before your heart attack, the most important thing you can do for your heart (and general health) is to quit. The risk of having another heart attack if you are a smoker is at least two times greater than those who don't smoke.
2. An aspirin a day, may keep a heart attack (and stroke) away. For most heart attack survivors, aspirin can substantially lower their chances of having another heart attack. That's because aspirin can stop clots from forming by thinning your blood. Talk to your doctor about the amount (dose) you should be taking and if you have any allergies or a history of stomach ulcers or bleeding.
3. Lower cholesterol. Cholesterol-lowering medications – most often statins – are prescribed to help prevent another heart attack. Statins can even help you live longer after your initial heart attack. In addition to medications, lifestyle changes such as exercising and adopting a better diet can also help lower cholesterol levels. The general rule is to keep your LDL or “bad” cholesterol under 100 mg/dl, and ideally lower than 70 mg/dl.
4. Get moving. Regular physical activity strengthens the heart muscle and is important for overall health too. It can also help you to lose weight and lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels – each of which ups the chance of heart attack.

The type of exercise you can do will depend on:

- The size of your heart attack
- How long it has been since the heart attack
- Any other health conditions you have
- Your general fitness level

Did You Know?

Each year over a million people in the U.S. have a heart attack. Older people are more likely to die from heart attack than younger folks, yet aggressive interventions are more lifesaving for older patients than younger patients.



Remember, you don't need to engage in high impact workouts. Even taking a brisk walk five times a week for 30 to 45 minutes can help you improve muscle and heart tone. Talk with your doctor before getting started. He or she may do what is called an exercise prescriptor treadmill test to help determine the level of exercise that is safe for you as you recover.

5. Stay within your ideal body weight. Excess weight not only forces your heart to work harder, but it can raise your blood pressure and cholesterol levels. If you need to lose weight, talk with your doctor about a safe way to do so.

6. Adopt healthy eating habits. Be thoughtful about the foods you eat. Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains and try to cut down on saturated, trans and other types of fats.

7. Know the signs and act fast. We already know men and women can differ when it comes to matters of the heart. But it turns out the signs of a heart attack can also be different between men and women. For example, women more often report an overwhelming feeling of fatigue and shortness of breath instead of the classic symptoms of chest discomfort that radiates or moves to the neck or arms. If you think you are having another heart attack, dial 9-1-1 immediately.

Common Signs of a Heart Attack:

- Chest discomfort including tightness, pressure, or pain
- Shortness of breath
- Discomfort in upper body including arms, shoulders, neck or back
- Nausea, vomiting, dizziness, lightheadedness, sweating

8. Stay heart safe by sticking to your medication plan. If you were treated with angioplasty, usually with the placement of a coronary stent (a small mesh tube that is used to treat narrowed or weakened arteries) – you will be prescribed two types of (antiplatelet) medications to prevent a clot from forming inside the stent, usually for at least one year. Not taking one or both of these medicines puts you at a substantial risk of a clot forming in the stent and another heart attack. In fact, the chances of dying from this type of heart attack may be as high as 30 percent.

It is critical to take these medications for the length of time recommended by your doctor. Never stop them without your cardiologist's advice. If you are having a procedure or elective surgery and another doctor asks you to stop taking these medications in preparation for surgery because of increased bleeding risk, make sure he or she talks to your cardiologist about the safety of stopping these drugs.



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Also let your doctor know if you are having trouble taking or affording any of your medications or if you have any side effects.

Questions to Ask Your Health Team

Think about and write down questions or concerns you have before each appointment so that you don't forget. Here are some examples:

- How serious was my heart attack?
- What are the chances that I will have another one? What can I do to try to prevent this from happening again?
- What types of exercise are safe for me?
- Should I look into starting a cardiac rehabilitation program?
- Are there any activities I should not do?
- Should I take aspirin daily? If so, what amount (dose)?
- What do my medications do? Why are they important?
- If I am a smoker, are there resources nearby that can help me quit
- Should I be taking my blood pressure at home?

“If you smoke, quit. There is nothing a cardiologist can do with medication, bypass surgery or coronary stenting that even closely approaches the importance of smoking cessation when it comes to lowering the risk of another heart attack. I almost never see a patient who has had a heart attack under the age of 45 who wasn't a smoker.”

– Ralph Brindis, M.D., M.P.H., Past President of the American College of Cardiology

For more information, visit CardioSmart at www.CardioSmart.org.