

Making Lifestyle Changes After a Heart Attack

As with any serious illness, the chances for recovery from heart disease depend at least partly on factors that are under the patient's control. Some things, like the skills of physicians and nurses, you must leave to others. And the body must heal at its own pace. But you can help it heal by changing habits and behavior that may have led to the disease in the first place and may slow a recovery now.

Some lifestyle changes are easier to make than others. And, as with other aspects of heart disease, it's usually easier to change when other people are there to show you how, or to cheer you on. Here are key areas where experts say you may have to learn new habits and unlearn old ones:

Exercise. If you were a sedentary sluggard before, you can't afford to be one now. You need to get moving, because exercise helps you on several fronts. It strengthens the heart, burns calories and raises your stamina so that you can lead a normal life. Regular exercise has also been linked to better mental health. Physical activity is used in the treatment of depression—a common problem for heart patients.

Patients who've just had heart attacks or open-heart surgery may well be wondering how much exertion their heart can take. After all, it has just come very close to not functioning at all. That's where professional help comes in. Exercise training, in which you learn activities that fit your physical condition, is an important part of cardiac rehabilitation programs. After you graduate from one of these, you'll have a routine to follow. Then it's up to you to follow it. Make sure you find room for it in your daily schedule.

Diet. It will probably be no surprise to you that you'll have to cut back on food that's bad for your heart and arteries. That good news is that you'll have plenty of options. Heart-healthy recipes and cookbooks are easy to find, on the Web or at bookstores. You'll also need to read labels on prepared food more carefully. You may have to adjust your taste buds a bit, but the range of heart-healthy food on the market is much better than it once was. For the latest research and recommendations on healthy eating, go to the American Heart Association Web site, www.americanheart.org, scroll to “Healthy Lifestyle” on the home page and click “Diet & Nutrition.”

Smoking and other substance abuse. Acquiring a taste for healthy food may be the easiest lifestyle change to make. Breaking the cigarette habit may be the hardest—even after a heart attack or open-heart surgery has given you the scare of your life. If you need a reason to quit, consider how tobacco smoke ruins your body's plumbing, both by fouling the lungs and constricting blood vessels. Then think of your heart working to pump blood through all those clogged pipes. In other words, don't think smoking is just a problem for the lungs. If you've tried to quit and failed before, try again until something works.

Heavy drinking (not to mention other drug abuse) is bad for your heart, too. If you're drinking to deal with stress, your cardiac rehab program should help you learn healthier ways to relax.

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