

Session 11: Staying Active & Maintaining Your Progress

Benefits Beyond Your Heart

There are many great benefits that come with regular physical activity – more than just benefits to your heart! Additional benefits include:

- May help to prevent cancers of the breast, uterus, and colon
- Strengthens your lungs and helps them work more efficiently
- Tones & strengthens your muscles
- Builds stamina
- Keeps your joints in good condition
- Improves balance
- May slow bone loss
- Gives you more energy
- Help you to relax and cope better with stress
- Builds confidence
- Helps you to fall asleep more quickly and sleep more soundly
- Helps you beat the blues
- Provides an enjoyable way to share time with friends or family

Return to Work

A key part of recovering from a heart event and managing a heart condition is returning to activities you used to do. For some people, this includes returning to work. Most people with heart disease go back to work **one** to **three** months after leaving the hospital.

Some people believe that a physical job isn't safe for your body, but this is usually not true. Jobs that involve some level of physical activity are often better for the heart than desk jobs. You may think you should retire early. It's important to take your time and talk about your concerns with your health team – base your decision on facts rather than fears.

Talk to your doctor before returning to work.

In deciding when you can return to work, you and your doctor will consider:

- How stable your condition is
- How safe you are to do your job
- What the licensing requirements are (e.g., for truck drivers or pilots)
- What the demands of your job are – both physically and mentally

Be prepared to tell your doctor:

- The physical work that you do, including lifting or carrying
- Whether you use heavy tools, like jackhammers
- The conditions that you work under (e.g., extreme temperatures, poor ventilation, late hours)
- The amount of job stress you have

You'll likely require a letter from your doctor stating when you can return to work and what you can or cannot do. If your doctor writes "light duty," this will be explained: what duties you can perform, what hours you can work, and how long light duty is to continue.

Sexual Activity

Sexual activity is an important part of life, and many people have anxiety or fears about having sex after a heart attack or heart surgery. You may be afraid that sex will be too much for your heart, or your partner might silently think the same. Some people become less interested in sex or experience erectile dysfunction while they're adapting to their heart condition. These problems can be increased by other medical conditions, medication side effects, mental health conditions, or problems in your relationship.

Ask your healthcare provider about when you can safely have sex again. For most people, this will be **two to eight** weeks after your heart attack or heart surgery. After this healing period, the risk of having a heart attack during sex is quite low. If you continue to experience chest pain, shortness of breath, or tiredness after climbing stairs, you should wait until you're doing better before having sex.

Sexual intercourse is like any other activity in that your heart rate and blood pressure increase. It's comparable to walking 3-6 km/h, or climbing 20 stairs in 10 seconds. Because of this, there are a few things you should keep in mind:

- Plan sexual activity for the time of day when you have the most energy and are least bothered by other health issues.
- Avoid having sex after a large meal. Give yourself 2-3 hours after eating before you have sex.
- Do not have sex in a very hot or cold place, and limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Avoid using tobacco. These may limit sexual function and increase strain on your heart.
- The effort on your heart is about the same regardless of your position.
- Share your fears, needs, desires and wishes with your partner about having sex again. This will promote closeness with your partner and improve the quality of your relationship.

Erectile Dysfunction & Heart Attacks

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is often associated with heart disease. Some medications used to treat heart disease or hypertension can cause a drop in your sex drive and difficulty with erections or orgasms. Speak to your doctor if you think your medications are affecting sexual function. **Never stop taking your cardiac medications because you have side effects that affect your sex life.**

Check with your doctor before starting or resuming ED medications. These medications are usually safe but can cause dangerous drops in blood pressure if taken within 48 hours of any form of nitroglycerin. If you do experience chest pain within 24 hours of taking ED medication, **call 911** and let the paramedics and emergency physician know you've taken these medications. **Do not take nitroglycerine.**

Tips for Staying Active

Taking time to participate in a regular or structured exercise routine can be difficult sometimes. Busy schedules, travel, and responsibilities can often get in the way. It's important to make physical activity a priority in your life to maintain heart health. Physical activity can be worked in to your everyday lifestyle by following a few simple tips!

1. Look for ways to be active with lifestyle activities. These are all around you!
 - Take the stairs instead of the elevator
 - Park farther away from the store and walk the extra distance
 - Cut the grass with a push mower
 - Work in the garden
 - Walk the dog instead of watching TV
 - Play ball with your children or grandchildren
 - Walk to lunch instead of riding in a car
 - Play golf walking the course instead of using a cart
2. Make exercise a regular part of your daily routine. Here are some ways you can do this:
 - Plan to exercise with a friend, colleague, neighbor, spouse, or children
 - Carry your workout bag, especially your athletic shoes, with you in the car at all times
 - Put your exercise clothes on and do not take them off until you've exercised
 - Place your home exercise equipment in a pleasant location in your home
 - Ask someone to remind you to exercise

3. Plan ahead! Adapt to changes in your routine and overcome situations that might make it difficult to continue with your regular exercise session. Have a plan in place to help you maintain your routine while you're traveling, busy, or not feeling motivated. Return to and review your SMART goal. Failing to plan is planning to fail!

- **Travel**
 - Walk instead of taking taxis.
 - Take a brisk walk before breakfast or at the end of the day.
 - Explore a new city by walking, jogging, or cycling to see the sights
 - Use the hotel gym/pool facilities.

- **Work Responsibilities**
 - Fit in short bouts of brisk walking several times during the day.
 - Discuss work issues with coworkers while walking.
 - Stretch during your breaks to improve productivity and concentration.

- **Special Occasions/Holidays**
 - Let others know that exercise is a priority for you and ask for their support.
 - Combine social activities with exercise, such as dancing, ice skating, hiking, cycling.

- **Injuries and sickness**
 - Look for a substitute activity – stationary cycling, chair exercises.
 - Do not break your routine. Continue to set aside time for exercise.
 - Never exercise when you have a fever.
 - Gradually build back up once you're well.

- **Family responsibilities**
 - Find opportunities for you and your family to exercise together.
 - Go for a walk together and use the time to talk.
 - Serve as an active role model for other family members.

As you move along through your Cardiac Rehab Program, it's important to start thinking about the ways that you will stay active and maintain your progress over the long term:
