

## **The first few days after you leave hospital**

- It is good to get back home after being in hospital. However, you may feel worried when you leave the safe and monitored environment of the hospital.
- It is best if you have someone to help you out at home for the first few days or weeks, depending on how well you are recovering.
- This will help to improve your confidence.
- Take things easy for the first few days after you get home following a heart attack.
- Make sure you have enough rest, but do get up, wash and get dressed.
- Also, do some light household activities such as making drinks and light snacks, going up and down stairs a few times a day, and some gentle walking.
- If any of these activities makes you feel unwell, contact your GP.
- Get into a routine for taking your medicines.
- And follow the instructions on the packet about when to take them. You may have been given a list of all your medicines in the discharge letter you were given when you left the hospital.
- As soon as possible, either you, or a relative or friend, should take your discharge letter to your GP.
- Your GP will need the information in this letter so that he or she can give you a repeat prescription for the medicines you'll need to take.

## **What happens to my heart after a heart attack?**

A heart attack always causes some permanent damage to the heart muscle, but the sooner treatment is given, the more muscle it is possible to save. Many people still have a good quality of life and health after a heart attack.

If a heart attack damages a significant amount of heart muscle, this can affect the pumping action of the heart. This can lead to **heart failure**, a condition which can cause symptoms such as breathlessness, tiredness and swollen ankles.

Also, some people continue to get **angina** after they have had treatment for their heart attack, because there is still narrowing of one or more of the coronary arteries (coronary heart disease), and angina is a symptom of coronary heart disease. Unfortunately there is no cure for coronary heart disease – only treatments to help relieve its symptoms.

Contact your GP if :

- you have any of the symptoms of heart failure – breathlessness, tiredness or swollen ankles
- you get any new symptoms, or
- your doctors said you probably would not get angina after having your heart attack, but you do get it.

### **Coming to terms with a heart attack**

A heart attack can be a frightening experience, especially if you have, until now, enjoyed good health.

While in hospital, many people react with fear and anxiety, possibly made worse by pain and the distress of being surrounded by lots of machines in an unfamiliar environment.

Most of the risk to life happens within the first few hours after the heart attack, which is the time when the heart is vulnerable to serious heart-rhythm problems.

Once you're back home, it is normal to worry about being left alone, or about what to do if the pain comes back.

The people you live with need to strike a balance between 'wrapping you up in cotton wool' and allowing you to do more than you are able to.

If you feel unsure about what you can do, talk to one of the staff in the cardiac rehabilitation team or your GP.

Everyone is different and you should get advice that is relevant to you.

You will probably have good days and bad days. This is quite normal.

You may feel low or depressed after returning home. This is a natural reaction to the stress of a major illness and it is quite common.

If these feelings continue, talk to your GP or practice nurse, or to one of the staff in the cardiac rehabilitation team.

Worry and stress can affect your life, making you feel anxious, panicky and depressed.

Anxiety, stress and depression can cause sleep problems such as waking early in the morning and not getting back to sleep. Sleeping problems can also be caused by some medicines. If you feel that anxiety is affecting your quality of life, talk to your GP about it.

Fears and changing emotions are normal after a heart attack. Some people worry about having another heart attack, or about dying. Or they may worry that they won't be able to do as much as before.

### **‘Will it happen again?’**

Many people wonder if they will have another heart attack. Having one heart attack does increase the risk of having another, but this risk is greatly reduced by appropriate treatment.

If you take the medicines your doctors have prescribed for you and follow a healthy lifestyle, you can significantly reduce your risk.

### **‘I’m afraid to do too much in case it brings on another heart attack.’**

It’s natural to feel a bit concerned about exercising after your heart attack. But your heart is a muscle and, like any other muscle in the body, it needs physical activity to keep it in good condition.

While you are in hospital, the nurses, physiotherapists and doctors will advise you about how much, and what type of, physical activity is suitable for you. At first this will be gentle activity. But you will then gradually do more activity for longer, as you become physically stronger and more confident.

The advice they give you about physical activity may be different to the advice given to other people who have had heart attacks. This is because everyone is different.

After you have left hospital, it is important to continue at home with the level of physical activity they have advised you to do.

It is important for you and those around you to be able to talk about your feelings.

### **Facing the future**

After your heart attack, and during your hospital stay and your recovery at home, you will have the chance to think about your lifestyle.

There may be some areas which you will want to change, to reduce the risk of having another heart attack.

For many people, life after a heart attack can be better than it was before.

### **The first few weeks after a heart attack**

#### **Getting active again**

Gradually increase the amount of physical activity you do as the weeks go by. Aim to do a little bit more each day, if you can. As the days and weeks pass, you will hopefully be able to see the progress you’re making, and that you can gradually do more and more. Once you have recovered from your heart attack, aim to do some physical activity every day.

Many people find that they get tired easily in the first weeks after a heart attack. This is normal and will usually pass as your strength and confidence return.

**Whatever form of exercise you do ...**

- Gradually build up the amount of activity you do.
- Rest if you feel very tired or breathless, or if you get chest pain. See your GP if these are new symptoms for you.
- Avoid doing activities after a large meal, or when it is very cold or very hot, or at high altitudes.
- If your doctor has prescribed GTN for you, take it with you when you exercise.

**Housework**

You can start doing light housework as soon as you feel fit and able – for example, washing up and dusting.

After a few weeks, you may feel well enough to do other heavier housework, such as vacuuming.

You can also do light gardening, but avoid digging and heavy lifting in the first few weeks. If in doubt, ask your cardiac rehabilitation nurse, GP or practice nurse for advice.

**Going back to work**

If you have a job, you may need to get a medical certificate – or 'fit note' – from the hospital or from your GP to give to your employer. This states if you are unfit to work and when you will be fit to return to work. Usually the hospital gives you a certificate for the time you are in hospital, and the GP gives you one to cover the time after that.

Most people will be able to go back to their previous job about four to six weeks after their heart attack, depending on how well their heart is working, and the type of work they do. Some people may go back earlier than this. If you have a heavy manual job, you may be away from work for at least three months. Or, you may decide to change job or take early retirement.

**Sex**

People with heart disease and their partners are often understandably anxious about how sex may affect the heart. However, most people can return to having sex after a heart attack. Like any other physical activity, having sex can temporarily increase the heart rate and blood pressure. This increases the work of the heart and, in people with coronary heart disease, may occasionally lead to breathlessness or chest pain. However, sex is just as safe as other equally energetic forms of physical activity or exercise.

Men and women can have a loss of sex drive or sexual dysfunction after a heart attack. Sexual dysfunction is when it is difficult to have sex – for example, a man being unable to get or maintain an erection. This may be the result of the emotional stress you are feeling or the effect of the heart attack on the relationship. Sometimes it can also be the result of taking certain medicines, including beta-blockers, which can affect sex drive, especially in men. Or it may be the result of diabetes or a disease of the circulation. If you are having difficulties, talk to your GP or the cardiac rehabilitation team about it. If you use GTN or take nitrates, you should not take PDE-5 inhibitors, such as Viagra.

## **Holidays**

Most people prefer to wait until they feel fully recovered from a heart attack before they go on holiday. Others may find that a holiday gives them the chance to relax and unwind and that this helps their recovery.

When you go on holiday, you might want to think about staying in accommodation that is easily accessible. Avoid places at high altitudes, or countries that are very hot or very cold. Avoid hilly destinations unless you are fit enough for that level of activity.

## **Flying**

People who have had a heart attack without complications can usually travel by air a few weeks after their heart attack. However, it may be better not to travel unless it is essential, until you feel fully recovered. The best thing is to ask your cardiologist, a nurse in the cardiac rehabilitation team or your GP about when it is OK for you to fly, as the advice will depend on your health and recovery.

If you do fly, you may need to check with the airline whether you need to tell them about your heart condition.

You should give yourself plenty of time at the airport before your flight leaves, to avoid rushing.

## **Medicines and travel insurance**

Pack an adequate supply of your medicines and take an up-to-date list of all your medicines with you, just in case you lose any of them. Also, take with you written summary of your medical conditions and any allergies you may have. Finally, make sure you have travel insurance. For a list of insurers, see below.

## **How can I reduce my risk of further heart problems?**

Keeping your heart healthy after your heart attack is vital, as it helps to reduce your risk of heart problems in the future. The following are all very important.

- If you smoke, stop smoking.
- Keep physically active.
- Keep to a healthy weight and body shape.
- Keep your total cholesterol level below 4mmol/l and your blood pressure below 130/80mmHg. It is important to get these checked regularly at your GP's surgery.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet, including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and two to three portions of oily fish a week – for example, herring, mackerel, pilchards, sardines, salmon or trout.
- If you have diabetes, control your blood glucose level.