

Heart Disease: How to Get Enough Exercise



When you have heart disease, it is very important to get regular exercise. Exercise can help your heart get stronger and work better. Try to do at least 2½ hours of moderate exercise a week.

Your doctor can suggest a safe level of exercise based on your condition and the stage of your disease. Even if you can only do a small amount, exercise will help you have more energy and manage your weight and your stress.

Exercise: Why does it matter?

Your heart is a muscle. When you use a muscle during exercise, it gets stronger and more efficient. A more efficient heart can pump more blood with each heartbeat and deliver more oxygen and nutrients to the rest of the body.

Getting regular exercise is important because even a short period of inactivity can weaken your heart.

Regular exercise also helps:

- Reduce chest pain or discomfort (angina) and symptoms of heart disease.
- Improve cholesterol.

- Lower your blood pressure.
- Reduce or control your weight.
- Reduce stress and lift your mood.

Getting ready to exercise

Before you start an exercise program:

- See your doctor for a complete physical exam. Your doctor may do an electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG) and a stress test to see what level of activity your heart can handle.
- Before your visit, make a list of questions to discuss with your doctor.
- Learn how to check your heart rate. Your doctor can tell you how fast your heart rate should be when you exercise.

Making an exercise plan

Your doctor can help you make an exercise plan. Or your doctor may suggest a cardiac rehab program at a local hospital or clinic. Cardiac rehab is a medically supervised program for people who have heart problems. It includes exercise, lifestyle changes, education, and emotional support. A team of doctors, nurses, dietitians, and physical therapists can design a program to help you improve your quality of life.

Most exercise programs include:

- Stretching. Stretching for 10 to 15 minutes helps warm up your muscles.
- Activities that raise your heart rate (aerobic exercise). Walking, riding a stationary bike, and swimming are all aerobic exercises.
- Strength training. Exercises using light weights can help tone and strengthen your muscles.
- A cool-down period.

Walking is an easy way to get exercise. Start out by walking a few minutes at a time. Slowly increase the amount of time you walk. You may want to set a goal of walking briskly for at least 30 minutes a day.

Once you have started

Once you start exercising, try to stick with it. Here are some tips that can help you succeed:

- Start slowly, and set realistic goals. If you expect too much too soon, you may get discouraged and give up.
- Find a partner. One of the best ways to stay motivated to exercise is to include other people. Ask a friend or coworker to join you. Join a health club or walking group.
- Choose a type of exercise that you enjoy. Walking is a great exercise that most people like and can do.
- Keep a daily record of your exercise. It is okay to skip a day once in a while or to cut back if you are too tired or not feeling well.
- Give yourself time. It can take months to get into the habit of exercising. After a few months, you may find that you look forward to it.
- Reward yourself. Build in rewards along the way that help you continue your program.

Keep in mind

It is important to:

- Watch for signs that your heart is working too hard. You are pushing yourself too hard if you cannot talk while you are exercising.

If you become short of breath or dizzy or have chest pain, stop, sit down, and rest. If these symptoms do not go away, call your doctor.

- If you feel "wiped out" the day after you exercise, walk slower or for a shorter distance until you can work up to a better pace.
- Ask your doctor about continuing your exercise program if your medicines change. New medicines can affect how you feel when you exercise.
- Take your pulse often. Check your pulse when you walk up hills or stairs. Make sure it stays in a safe range.
- Adjust your exercise program if it is interrupted for more than a couple of days. Gradually increase to your regular activity level.

For safety:

- Do not exercise outdoors when it is very cold, very hot, or very humid. When the weather is bad, exercise indoors or walk at a mall.
- Avoid exercises that require or encourage holding your breath, such as push-ups and sit-ups. Also avoid heavy lifting.
- Do not take hot or cold showers or sauna baths right after you exercise. Very hot or very cold temperatures can be dangerous.