

Patient information from BMJ

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What you can do to prevent another heart attack

If you've had a heart attack, there are things that you and your doctors can do to reduce your chances of having another.

Talk to your doctors

Before you leave hospital, make sure you understand what has happened to you. Talk about your heart attack, test results, and treatments with your doctors. Ask whether you need to change your diet or do more exercise.

Your doctors should answer all of your questions. You may also be given some written information that tells you what you can do to reduce your chances of having another heart attack.

Take your drug treatments

You'll probably get several drug treatments to take after a heart attack to reduce your chances of having another one.

These may include medications to:

- stop your blood from clotting in your blood vessels
- dilate (widen) your blood vessels so that blood can pass through them more easily
- lower your blood pressure
- lower your cholesterol.

It's important that you take these medicines as directed. You might need to take them for the rest of your life.

Stop smoking

If you smoke, try to stop. Smoking narrows the arteries that carry blood to your heart (your coronary arteries). If you'd like to stop, the doctors at your hospital, your regular doctor, or your cardiac rehabilitation team will be able to assist you.

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There are many treatments that can help you stop smoking. Talk to your doctor about what options would be best for you.

Having counselling with other people who are trying to stop smoking can also help. Also, tell your friends and family that you are going to stop smoking. Their support will be important.

And be realistic. You might not stop on your first try. But it's important to keep trying until you're successful.

Eat a healthy diet

If you've had a heart attack, you'll be advised to eat a healthy diet. You should aim to:

- eat more fruit, vegetables, and nuts
- eat wholemeal bread and pasta instead of white bread and pasta
- eat less sugar, red meat, and processed foods
- cook with olive oil rather than other types of fat.

Your doctor might also suggest that you eat between two and four portions of oily fish a week. Oily fish include salmon, trout, mackerel, tuna (fresh, not tinned) and sardines.

If you're taking vitamin supplements, make sure they don't contain beta-carotene. It can increase your chance of another heart attack.

Join a cardiac rehabilitation programme

Rehabilitation programmes can help you recover from your heart attack, and keep your heart healthy. Before you leave hospital, you and your doctors should discuss how you can join a programme. If your doctors don't mention it, ask.

Cardiac rehabilitation is an important part of your recovery. It can help you:

- recover faster
- get fit
- change your lifestyle to reduce your risk of having another heart attack
- manage stress or depression
- live longer.

Most cardiac rehabilitation programmes include:

- information about exercising
- education about making healthy lifestyle choices, including eating better and giving up smoking
- counselling, or a talking treatment, to help you manage stress and depression.

Everyone is different, so the rehabilitation team at your hospital will plan a programme that suits you. It may last six weeks, six months, or even longer. But it can't work without your commitment. Don't give up.

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Take regular exercise

With help from your cardiac rehabilitation team or your doctor, you can develop an exercise plan that suits your needs, abilities, and interests. Or you may do supervised exercise as part of a rehabilitation programme.

Exercise improves stamina and strength, and can make you feel good. Over time, exercise makes your heart work better. It can also help you lose weight.

For most people, a supervised exercise programme after a heart attack is safe. And many people can continue to exercise safely on their own after a few weeks.

Consider counselling

You may feel anxious or depressed after a heart attack. Lots of people do. But anxiety and depression can slow down your recovery. A good cardiac rehabilitation programme will spot these problems and offer you treatment. If you need help, make sure you ask for it. It is an important part of your recovery.

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