



Heart  
Foundation

Heart information

# Recovering from a heart attack



## Your time line for recovery

This brochure outlines the steps to recovery and some average time frames for getting back to normal life. The time it takes for each individual to achieve these steps will vary, depending on the severity of the heart attack, the treatment received and other factors. The time frames given in this brochure are a rough guide only. You should speak to your doctors, nurses and cardiac rehabilitation professionals about your own 'time line for recovery'.

## Leaving hospital

You will go home when you are feeling better, have no further symptoms and your condition is settled. This is usually within two to seven days but may be longer, depending on the severity of your condition, your treatment and the results of tests done while you are in hospital.

You should make sure that you have a few things before you leave hospital.

- Adequate supplies of any new medicines and information on how to take them. If you are unsure, ask to speak with a pharmacist.
- A written plan of action that you should follow if you get any further symptoms (see back page).
- Any necessary follow-up appointments with specialists, your GP or other health professionals.
- Instructions on how to care for your wound(s) if you have had an angiogram, angioplasty or bypass surgery.
- Information on lifestyle changes that you can make to reduce your risk of further heart problems.

You should also receive a referral to a cardiac rehabilitation program before, or soon after, you leave hospital. To help you to remember the details of your local cardiac rehabilitation program, you can write them on the back page of this brochure.

## Back at home

The table below outlines when some of the 'milestones' of recovery might typically take place.

What	When
<b>Seeing your GP</b>	
You should see your family doctor as soon as possible after your discharge from hospital, because he or she will be an important partner in managing your heart health in the long term. Take your prescription book and/or discharge information from the hospital (if these are available) when you see your doctor so that he or she knows exactly which medicines you are taking. Also take any results from tests that were done while you were in hospital.	As soon as possible.
<b>Self care</b>	
You will be washing and dressing yourself before you leave hospital. Avoid extremes in temperature (i.e. hot and cold) when showering and bathing.	Straight away.
If you have had an angiogram, angioplasty or bypass surgery, remember to look after your wound(s) as instructed.	After bypass surgery, the areas around your wounds may feel numb for some weeks.
<b>Attending your cardiac rehabilitation program</b>	
Everyone who has had a heart attack should be referred to a cardiac rehabilitation program. These programs help you to continue the gradual increase in physical activity that you began in hospital and provide you and your family with education, information and support. The right rehabilitation program will help most people to reduce their risk of further heart problems.	Programs usually commence within two to four weeks of discharge and run for four to 12 weeks.
<b>Travel</b>	
It is fine to travel by train, tram or bus, or as a passenger in a car, straight away, but make sure that you have a seat so that you do not get too tired. You may find that long trips are tiring and you may get car sick more easily than usual. Have regular breaks if travelling for long periods of time.	Straight away.
Before travelling by aeroplane you should seek your doctor's advice. You may need a medical clearance form. If you are unsure of flying requirements, check with your airline.	On your doctor's advice.

## Emotions

It is normal to feel 'down' and worried after a heart attack. These feelings are normal and often do not last long. They may often be eased by talking to the people around you, such as your doctor, cardiac rehabilitation team, family and friends.

Negative feelings are common and normal after heart attack and/or surgery, but symptoms lasting longer than a couple of weeks may indicate depression.

However, it is important to realise that depression is much more common among people with heart disease than in the general population. People with depression usually feel sad, down or miserable most of the time, and find it hard to do normal activities. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression for more than two weeks, you should talk to your doctor, who can discuss with you treatments that can help.

Speak to your doctor as soon as possible if you have any concerns about the way that you feel.

## Friends and visitors

Friends and family mean well when they visit and call you. When you are recovering, especially from surgery, ask someone to screen your calls and/or specify a time for people to call. Some people find it easier if they have someone else as the point of contact to let everyone know how things are going.

As you feel able.

## Physical activity

It is normal to feel tired after a heart attack, but regular moderate-intensity physical activity is a vital part of your return to normal life. Start slowly – get dressed every morning, do a bit of gentle walking around the house and garden, or out in the street on flat ground. Build up gradually to walking further distances and up inclines. Walking is safe and easy, but you could also try some cycling, easy-paced strengthening and stretching activities or other light daily exercises. Your doctor and cardiac rehabilitation team will help you with your physical activity program.

Start gently straight away, and increase gradually.

After about six weeks you can usually go back to other activities such as tennis and lawn bowls.

Talk to your doctor or cardiac rehabilitation team about specific activities of interest.

## Sex

Most people can have sex soon after a heart attack. Generally, it is said that if you can walk up two flights of stairs without chest pain or breathlessness, you should be able to have sex. We recommend that people who have had bypass surgery wait until their breastbone has healed (approximately six to eight weeks after the operation). Remember to stop any activity, including intercourse, if you have any pain or discomfort in the chest.

As soon as you feel ready (generally six to eight weeks after bypass surgery).

Some short-term lack of interest in sex is common after a heart attack. Also, some heart medicines can affect your sexual interest or capacity. It's important to discuss these issues with your partner, because you could both be feeling unsure.

If you have any concerns about any of these issues, you should discuss them with your doctor.

## Driving

It is common to start driving private vehicles two weeks after a heart attack. However, this depends on how your recovery is going. You should follow the advice of your doctor and/or rehabilitation team.

Two to four weeks after a heart attack.

You may need to contact the relevant authority in your state, and/or your insurance company, to seek advice on any restrictions or implications for your insurance coverage.

You should talk to your doctor about whether or not you can drive a commercial vehicle, and if so, when. This usually depends on being fit enough to meet the relevant legal requirements.

On your doctor's clearance.

## Returning to work

Most people can go back to work after a heart attack, usually within a few weeks.

Two to four weeks after a heart attack.

If you have had bypass surgery, it is likely to be a little longer before you can go back to work. It might be four to six weeks for a desk job, and longer for jobs that are more physically demanding.

From four to six weeks after bypass surgery.

You should discuss this with your doctor and cardiac rehabilitation team, as it will depend on how quickly you recover and the type of work that you will be returning to.

For heart health information  
1300 36 27 87  
[www.heartfoundation.org.au](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au)

## Reducing the risk of further heart problems

The best way to reduce the risk of further heart problems is to make sure that you take your medicines as prescribed by your doctor and tackle the 'risk factors' that contribute to the underlying cause.

The most important things you can do are to:

- take your medicines as prescribed
- be smoke-free
- enjoy healthy eating
- be physically active
- manage your blood pressure
- achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.

People with diabetes should aim to keep their blood glucose levels within the normal non-diabetic range.

Small changes in your lifestyle can make all the difference.

### Remember:

- to work closely with your health care team
- you are not alone.

Each year in Australia about 50,000 people are hospitalised with a heart attack. Most people who get to hospital quickly after the onset of symptoms will survive and recover well by working in partnership with their health care team.

For detailed information on coronary heart disease and its treatments, or how to lower your risk of further heart problems, call our Health Information Service on 1300 36 27 87 and ask to speak with our trained heart health professionals.

## Action plan for angina and warning signs of heart attack

1. **Stop.** Immediately stop what you are doing and rest.

2. **Talk.** If you are with someone, tell them what you are feeling.

- If you take angina medicine:
  - Take one dose of your medicine. Wait 5 minutes.
  - If you still have symptoms, take another dose of your medicine. Wait 5 minutes.

- If any of your symptoms:
  - are severe
  - get worse quickly
  - have lasted 10 minutes

3. **Call Triple Zero (000)\* now!**

Ask for an ambulance. Don't hang up. Wait for advice from the operator.

If your symptoms are severe or get worse quickly, don't wait. Call Triple Zero (000)\* immediately.

\*If calling Triple Zero (000) does not work on your mobile phone, try 112.

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## Write the details of your local cardiac rehabilitation program here

Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Coordinator: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_