



Previous Heart Attack & Physical Activity

A heart attack happens when one of the arteries supplying oxygen to the heart muscle gets blocked. The heart muscle becomes permanently damaged if it is starved of oxygen for too long. **Physical activity attempts to recondition the heart muscle. Maintaining regular activity reduces angina pains and dying from another heart attack.**¹ It reduces angina symptoms by improving blood supply and the heart muscle function.

Regular physical activity has a positive effect on other risk factors for cardiovascular disease including: high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, high blood sugars (by improving the body's natural regulatory system), having a family history of heart disease, smoking and increased body fat (in particular having lots of fat around the middle). If you have been inactive for a long time, begin with light activities and gradually increase the amount you do as you get stronger and more confident.

Regular physical activity also gives you more energy, builds confidence and can help you to sleep more soundly at night. You can combine your activity time with family and friends or use it as an opportunity to reflect on things and listen to your favourite music.



Physical Activity Recommendations for inactive adults with a previous heart attack

Aim to do the following three types of activity:

-  **Aerobic activity** at relative moderate intensity for at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) a week – one way to approach this is to do 30 minutes on at least five days each week.
-  **Muscle strengthening activity** on two or more days a week which work all major muscles groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulder and arms)
-  **Flexibility exercises** on a daily basis



Do not worry if you struggle to meet the recommendations, because by trying to become more active, you are still gaining some health benefits



Plan your lifestyle change

Keep it simple: Don't make drastic commitments. Choose activities that are easy, simple and enjoyable to maintain.

Set a goal and monitor: Set weekly targets that are achievable and keep a record of what you do. If you fail, create barriers to the things that stop you from reaching them.

Go Public: Discuss your goals and activities with others to keep you motivated for longer.

See 'Getting started' at www.prescription4exercise.com for useful tips on planning your next move.



Aerobic activity

Aerobic activity, also known as endurance activity, is when large muscle movements, maintained over a period of time, make the heart and lungs work harder.

Activity Type? – Any type that you can maintain comfortably is ideal. Choose exercises that you enjoy, such as walking, cycling or group fitness classes. Aerobic activity is very important for your heart and circulation.

How long (duration)? – You can split your total activity amount into minimum bouts of 10 minutes if needed. If you have been inactive for a long time, start with short daily amounts and increase this as your body allows and you feel more confident. Remember not to sit for hours. A regular break from sitting every hour is healthy.

How hard (intensity)? - Walking is a good way to start if you have been inactive for a long time. Choose a walking distance and speed that you know you can manage easily without getting angina. Make this your target and each time, judge whether the activity was easy or difficult. If it was easy increase the distance but if it was too hard slow down or shorten the distance. You should aim for no more than a relatively moderate intensity activity. The ‘talk test’ is a simple way to measure moderate intensity. This means that you can still talk, but not sing, during the activity.

How often (frequency)? –If you aim to do 30 minutes per day then do this at least 5 times per week so that you reach the 150 minutes total per week. Daily or near daily exercise is better as regular physical activity helps keep your heart healthy. When you start any new activity make sure you give your body enough time to recover and adapt between sessions.



Muscle Strengthening and Flexibility

Activities that promote strengthening and flexibility are vital for a complete physical activity programme. Being stronger and more flexible helps you to achieve aerobic activities, such as brisk walking or swimming, more successfully. You can find some notes and videos for some simple ‘Strength and Flexibility Exercises’ at www.prescription4exercise.com.

Safety considerations

- If you have led a very sedentary lifestyle, begin by doing low intensity exercise of short duration, e.g. 10 minutes. Increase your level of activity gradually to avoid injury
- Stop exercising if you feel dizzy, sick, unwell or very tired.
- See a doctor if you are having chest pain, black outs or breathlessness on mild exertion.
- Reduce your chance of experiencing angina by warming up at the beginning and cooling down at the end of your activity session.
- Try to avoid doing physical activity after a heavy meal or in very cold or very hot weather.
- Cool down slowly as some blood pressure medications reduce blood pressure too much if exercise is ended too quickly.
- Have your GTN spray or tablet to hand during activity. If you experience angina symptoms, stop and rest until the discomfort passes. Take your GTN medication as instructed by your doctor or nurse.
- If you are about to do an activity, such as climbing a hill, which you know will bring on your angina then you might want to take your GTN spray or tablet to avoid angina discomfort.
- If your angina occurs more frequently or you cannot do what you once did then see your doctor as soon as possible.
- Avoid holding your breath during weight training as this can cause large changes in your BP which could cause you to faint. Avoid heavy weightlifting.
- Avoid exercises in which the head is lower than the heart as this can raise your blood pressure.

If you have any other long term health conditions, ask your healthcare professional and/or visit [www.prescription4exercise](http://www.prescription4exercise.com) for additional useful safety considerations.

References

1. Wannamethee G, Whincup PH, Shaper AG et al. 1995. Factors determining case fatality in myocardial infarction. Who dies in a heart attack? *British Heart Journal*; 74(3):324-31
2. Department of Health and Human Services (2008) Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee Report, Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services

Further reading

- Start Active, Stay Active - a report on physical activity for health from the four home countries' Chief Medical Officers. UK Department of Health, July 2011. www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_128209
- ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription, American College of Sports Medicine, 2009

Links

Visit www.prescription4exercise.com for more a more comprehensive guide to physical activity recommendations, video examples of strengthening and flexibility exercises, local activities and more.

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