



## QUESTIONS AFTER A HEART ATTACK

If you are recovering from a heart attack, you and your family probably have a lot of questions about your recovery period, and how you can speed it up. Your doctor is the best source of information about your personal situation; but the following questions and answers may help to answer some of the most common questions that heart attack patients have.

### **1. WHY DID I HAVE A HEART ATTACK? I WASN'T DOING ANYTHING UNUSUAL.**

A heart attack can occur at any time; while you are resting, or in the middle of strenuous activity. Although the attack itself may be very sudden, the stage is set over many years. Heart attacks result from atherosclerosis in the arteries that carry blood (and thus food and oxygen) to the heart muscle itself.

Atherosclerosis is a slowly developing disease in which deposits of cholesterol and other fatty substances line the inner walls of the arteries like minerals line the inside of a pipe over time. As the deposits build up, the arteries become narrowed, and the flow of blood becomes more difficult. If a blood clot forms, the passageway is narrowed, and the flow of blood to the heart muscle is shut off. The result is a heart attack. The medical term for the injury that results to the heart muscle is a "myocardial infarction".

### **2. WHY DIDN'T I HAVE ANY WARNING?**

Atherosclerosis often develops over many years without any warning symptoms. One of the reasons that there may not be any warning symptoms is that if one of the



coronary arteries becomes narrowed, other nearby vessels sometimes grows new branches to help compensate. The effect is that blood gets to the heart by a kind of detour called collateral circulation. This collateral circulation may have actually helped to prevent a heart attack; while in other cases, it develops after a heart attack as the body's way to help the heart muscle recover.

### **3. HOW WAS MY HEART INJURED, AND HOW WILL THIS AFFECT THE WAY IT WORKS?**

When a heart attack occurs, a small part of the heart dies because its supply of oxygen-carrying blood is cut off. However, the heart is a remarkably tough organ, and even though a part of it may have died, the rest will continue to work. Because it has been damaged though, your heart will be weak after a heart attack, and can't pump as much blood as usual. During the first few days after a heart attack, rest is essential, and after that your activity should be limited until the heart has time to heal; just like the torn leg muscle of an injured athlete. When the heart is healed, you should be able to return to a normal lifestyle.

As the damaged part of the heart heals, a tough scar forms. This process takes time and the scar is still forming after you begin to feel well again. Usually this takes about a month to six weeks, but the length of time will depend on the extent of the injury and your own rate of healing. Thus the amount of activity that is recommended after a heart attack will depend on your own personal situation.

### **4. WHAT FEELINGS ARE NORMAL AFTER A HEART ATTACK?**

You will probably experience a wide range of emotions, but three of the most common are **fear**, **anger**, and **depression**. Fear is probably the most common emotion,



fear of dying, fear of another heart attack. Your best defense is knowledge about your condition and what you can do to help yourself.

Anger is also common. "Why did this happen to me? Why now?" There are no easy answers to these questions. Anger is one of the stages in recovery, so accept it. Try not to take it out on your loved ones. They are also experiencing these same emotions in a different way.

Depression is also a normal part of the process. Try to concentrate on resting and healing. It is important to recognize when depression becomes more serious and requires some intervention from your doctor. The following are warning signs that a more serious depression has developed, in which case you should tell your doctor. You may require medication to help you to feel better.

1. Sleeping problems (Either difficulty falling asleep or wanting to sleep all of the time).
2. Appetite problems.
3. Fatigue.
4. Emotional stress (Either tense, irritable or agitate; or listless and apathetic).
5. Difficulty concentrating
6. Apathy.
7. Low self-esteem.
8. Despair.
9. Slovenliness.

## **5. WHY DO I FEEL WEAK NOW THAT I'M HOME? IS IT HEART DAMAGE?**

If you rested a lot in the hospital, you'll feel weak when you get home. The main reason for this is not heart damage, but inactivity. You may be surprised to learn that your



muscles lose 15% of their strength in just one week. They regain strength only through exercise. That's why your doctor has given you a program of gradually increasing activities. It normally takes anywhere from 2-6 weeks to get your muscles back into shape.

## **6. WHAT ARE MY CHANCES OF LEADING A NORMAL LIFE AGAIN?**

Most people who have had a heart attack can resume their former activities within a few weeks or months, although certain modifications of lifestyle may be necessary. The vast majorities of heart attack victims survive their first heart attack, and most fully recover and enjoy many more years of productive activity.

## **7. WHEN CAN I GO BACK TO WORK?**

Between 80 and 90 percent of heart attack victims return to work in 2 - 3 months. Usually they can return to their jobs. Of course this depends on two things: how badly their heart was damaged, and how demanding their job is. Some victims may have to switch jobs and take one that is less taxing to their hearts. Cardiac Rehabilitation Programs may help you to find out how much work you can safely do.

It is important to keep in mind that when you are not working, a reasonable amount of rest is necessary, but exercise, recreation and social life are as good for you as they are for everyone else. In many cases, doctors recommend even more exercise for people who have had heart attacks than they were getting before. A good night's rest is important as well, especially for someone who has recently had a heart attack. Sometimes a short nap during the day is helpful. It is important for heart patients to rest before they become too tired.



## **8. WHAT KIND OF EXERCISE CAN I DO?**

Most people who recover from a heart attack can take walks, play golf, fish, and swim and enjoy similar activities with no trouble at all. Still, don't exercise until you talk to your doctor to find out what exercise and how much is appropriate for you. A Stress Test will help to determine the amount and type of exercise that is appropriate for you.

## **9. AM I LIKELY TO HAVE CHEST PAIN?**

Not everyone has chest pain after a heart attack, but it is possible that you will have some angina. Angina is a light pain or pressure that occurs in the chest when part of the heart doesn't get enough blood for the work that it has to do. For that reason, angina usually occurs during or immediately after physical exertion, intense emotion, or eating a heavy meal. If you are subject to angina, your doctor will prescribe medication to ease or prevent the pain. Exercise will help you to develop collateral circulation so that the heart gets the oxygen and blood that it needs.

## **10. SHOULD I BE ON A REDUCED - CALORIE DIET?**

It is important for people with heart disease to keep their weight down. However, it is also important to eat a well-balanced diet containing healthy amounts of protein, vitamins and minerals, and enough energy to fuel your activities. Heavy meals make big demands on your heart, thus it is better to eat smaller lighter meals. It is important to reduce the amount of fat calories which in turn reduces your cholesterol intake. In order to compensate for the decrease in dietary fat, you'll need to increase your consumption of carbohydrates, especially vegetables, fruits and cereals. Your doctor may tell you that it's all right to drink moderate amounts of alcohol, but if you're trying to lose weight, remember that's alcoholic beverages are high in calories.



## **11. SHOULD I STOP SMOKING?**

**YES!** Cigarette smoking is unhealthy! It's an even bigger risk for people who have coronary artery disease. In fact, if you resume smoking after a heart attack, your chances of having a second heart attack are doubled. Smoking puts an added strain on your heart, because it causes blood vessels to constrict; and remember that some of them are already narrowed and damaged. Smoking also increases the level of carbon monoxide in your blood and so deprives your heart of the oxygen it needs.

## **12. IS SEXUAL ACTIVITY PERMITTED?**

Most people can continue their same pattern of sexual activity after they recover from a heart attack. Discuss this question with your doctor. If you get anginal chest pain when you exert yourself during sex, your doctor may prescribe nitroglycerin for you to take before sexual relations.