

Acute Coronary Syndrome: Tips for Recovering and Staying Well

Acute coronary syndrome (ACS) is the term used to describe certain conditions that cause a reduction of blood flow to the heart. These conditions include: unstable angina and myocardial infarction (heart attack).

If you have ACS, you may feel worried and overwhelmed. Your doctor is an important resource during this time, so be sure to ask him or her for information and advice. This handout answers some of the basic questions you may have.

How soon can I return to my regular activities?

This will depend on the condition of your heart and what activities you usually do. It's important to start slowly to give your heart a chance to heal. Your doctor will talk to you about what activities you can do and when you can start doing them again.

Don't return to any kind of exercise without talking to your doctor first. It is also important to enroll in a cardiac rehabilitation program so that your heart rate, the rhythm of your heart and your blood pressure can be monitored as you exercise.

What is a cardiac rehabilitation program?

Before you leave the hospital, your doctor will probably talk to you about enrolling in a cardiac rehabilitation program. A cardiac rehabilitation program provides information that will help you understand your risk factors. The program will also guide you to begin a heart-healthy lifestyle that can prevent future heart problems. You will learn about exercise and diet, and how to reach and maintain a healthy weight. You will also learn ways to control your stress level, your blood pressure and your cholesterol levels.

Your cardiac rehabilitation program will probably start while you are still in the hospital. After you leave the hospital, your rehabilitation will continue in a rehab center. The rehab center may be at the hospital or in another location.

Most cardiac rehabilitation programs last 3 to 6 months. Your doctor will talk to you about how often you need to attend the program. Once you enroll in a cardiac rehabilitation program, regular attendance is very important. The more you learn and make changes in your lifestyle to live a heart-healthy life, the better your chances of preventing more heart problems in the future.

When can I go back to work?

The amount of time you are off from work will depend on the condition of your heart and how strenuous or stressful your work is. You may have to make some changes in how you do your job. If your job is too hard on your heart, you may have to change jobs, at least for a short time.

Written by Susan D. Housholder, RN, MSN, ANP-BC, FAHA

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Can I have sex?

Yes, but if you have had a heart attack, your doctor will probably tell you to wait about 2 to 3 weeks before having sex again. As with other types of activity, you may need to start out slowly. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns.

Will I have to take medicine for the rest of my life?

Probably. If you have ACS, your doctor will probably want you to take certain medicines for a long time to reduce your risk of more heart problems. Your doctor can answer any questions you have about these medicines, such as the benefits and risks of taking them.

Aspirin can reduce the risk of a heart attack. Your doctor may want you take a low dose of aspirin each day to keep your blood from forming clots that can eventually block the arteries. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of aspirin therapy.

Antiplatelet drugs can also help stop blood clots from forming. Blood clots can block the arteries that carry blood and oxygen to the heart (called the coronary arteries) and cause a heart attack or a stroke. These drugs are especially important to take for at least a year if you have had a stent placed in your heart.

Beta blockers are a group of drugs that lower the heart rate and blood pressure. They help improve blood flow to the heart.

ACE inhibitors are a group of drugs that can help if your heart is not pumping blood well. This medicine helps open (dilate) your arteries and lower your blood pressure. This improves blood flow.

Statins are a group of drugs that are used to lower “bad” cholesterol (also called LDL, or low-density lipoprotein) levels and may help increase “good” cholesterol (also called HDL, or high-density lipoprotein). If you have had a heart attack, your doctor may prescribe a statin.

What else can I do to help keep my heart as healthy as possible?

There are steps you can take to speed your recovery and to prevent future heart problems. These steps are called “secondary prevention.” First, talk to your doctor to understand the type of heart disease you have. Your doctor will explain your risk factors and tell you how to prevent more damage to your heart. The following are some basic tips for a heart-healthy lifestyle.

Recognize symptoms.

If you have ACS, you are at higher risk of heart problems. Seek emergency medical assistance if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Chest pain, tightness, pressure or pain in your arms, neck, jaw, or stomach
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness, feeling like you are going to faint
- Pale, sweaty skin
- Very fast or irregular heartbeat
- Nausea and vomiting
- Swelling or pain in your legs
- Sudden, overwhelming fatigue

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Stop smoking. Tobacco use is a major risk factor for heart disease. It damages the walls of the blood vessels, reduces your blood's ability to carry oxygen to other organs (such as the heart) and causes blood to clot more easily. Nicotine also raises your blood pressure. If you smoke, ask your doctor to help you make a plan to quit.

In addition to not smoking, try to avoid secondhand smoke. Secondhand smoke is a combination of the smoke that smokers exhale and the smoke that comes from the burning end of a cigarette.

Control your blood pressure. High blood pressure puts a strain on your heart and blood vessels. Your doctor will talk to you about ways to control your blood pressure, such as exercising, eating a diet that's low in salt, and losing weight if you are overweight. Your doctor may also prescribe one or more medicines to help control your blood pressure. It is important to take medicine just the way your doctor tells you to.

Control your cholesterol levels. Too much cholesterol in your blood can raise your risk of having a heart attack. Eat a heart-healthy diet, and talk to your doctor about developing an exercise program to keep your "bad" (LDL) cholesterol low and your "good" (HDL) cholesterol high. If your bad cholesterol is high, your doctor may prescribe medicines to help lower it.

Check for diabetes. Diabetes increases your risk of heart attack and stroke. Talk to your doctor about getting screened for diabetes. If you have diabetes, talk to your doctor to develop a plan for keeping it under control.

Exercise. Regular aerobic exercise can make your heart stronger. Examples of aerobic exercise include walking, jogging, running, bicycling and swimming. Exercise helps your heart pump more blood with each heartbeat and deliver more oxygen to your body. It can lower your cholesterol level and blood pressure, and it relieves stress.

A combination of regular exercise and a healthy diet can also help you lose weight. If you are overweight, losing just 10% of your body weight can lower your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

Eat a heart-healthy diet. The food you eat affects how well your blood flows through your heart and arteries. A diet that is high in "bad" fats (saturated and trans fats) can gradually cause buildup (plaque) in your arteries. This buildup slows the blood flow to your heart. It can eventually block your arteries.

Add foods to your diet that are low in cholesterol and saturated fats. Eat more fruits and vegetables. Eat less red meat and fewer high-fat dairy products. Cut down on salt, and avoid fried and processed foods.

Control your stress level. Depression, anxiety and stress may increase your risk of heart problems. Ask your doctor for information about healthy ways to cope with your emotions and reduce your stress level.

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