Irish Heart Foundation

Here for Every Heartbeat

Step by step through cardiac rehabilitation

Your helpful guide to a healthier heart



irishheart.ie

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Your helpful guide to a healthier heart

Produced by the Irish Heart Foundation | 2026

This book is one of the publications in our patient information series. It is about the cardiac rehabilitation programme, its importance and the steps you can take to live a heart-healthy life.

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We would also like to thank our team of medical reviewers who have made sure the information here is medically accurate.

For more information or to donate, visit irishheart.ie.

Introduction



This book is for people who are taking part in **cardiac rehabilitation**, their **families** and their **loved ones**.

This book will have the information you need to support you as you journey through the cardiac rehabilitation programme.

It has information about cardiac rehabilitation and how to take care of your heart.

You don't need to read the whole book.

- Start by reading **10 things to know about cardiac rehabilitation** on page 4.
- Use the **contents** page on page 6 to find any other information you need.

As you read this information, you can jot down your notes in the **notes** section.

The **appendix** contains other resources that may be helpful.

10 things to know about cardiac rehabilitation

1. Cardiac rehabilitation (called 'cardiac rehab' for short) is a comprehensive programme based on research that shows its benefits. This programme helps you get **stronger and feel better after a heart problem or event**. It also helps you to create healthy lifestyle habits so you can continue to take care of your heart.



2. The cardiac rehab programme will cover many aspects of your health and will take place over a number of weeks. Your healthcare team will give you details on the cardiac rehab programme in your area.



3. Cardiac rehab can help people who have had a **heart attack, heart transplant, heart surgery, a stent placed or** spontaneous coronary artery dissection. It can also help people living with heart conditions (like **stable angina**) and those living with **stable heart failure**.



4. Cardiac rehab is an important part of recovery. It empowers you, teaches you how to exercise safely, teaches you about heart health and offers support. It is important to understand that **cardiac rehab is an ongoing process** to help you stay well.



5. You will be contacted by the cardiac rehab team while you are **in hospital** or after you have been **discharged**. If you have not been contacted by the cardiac rehab team, your doctor can refer you.



6. A heart event doesn't just affect your body – it can have a big impact on **how you feel and your mental health**. In cardiac rehab, emotional recovery is just as important as physical recovery, and your cardiac rehab team will help to support you through both of these journeys.



7. **Physical activity** has many health and wellbeing benefits. However, you may be concerned about the risks of moving more. Before you start moving again, it is important to check in with your doctor (or your cardiac rehab team) and increase your activity slowly over time.



8. A **heart-healthy diet** like the Mediterranean diet can help to reduce the risk of further heart problems and support you in your recovery. Your dietary needs will be unique to you. Speak to your doctor for individual advice. Your cardiac rehab team can also signpost you to resources and support. For more information on a heart-healthy lifestyle, see irishheart.ie/how-to-keep-your-heart-healthy.



9. Knowing your **key health numbers** (pulse rate, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar) helps you keep track of your heart health. Get regular health checks so you can keep track of your numbers. You can get health checks done by a doctor or nurse. Some local pharmacies also do them.



10. Recovery may affect your work depending on your symptoms and the severity of them. It also depends on the kind of work you do. See citizensinformation.ie for information about financial and key social welfare supports available to you.



Step by step through cardiac rehabilitation



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Step by step through cardiac rehabilitation



Introduction to cardiac rehabilitation

Introduction to cardiac rehabilitation

What is cardiac rehabilitation?

Cardiac rehabilitation (called 'cardiac rehab' for short) is a comprehensive programme based on research that shows its benefits. This programme helps you get stronger and feel better after a heart problem or event. It also helps you to create healthy lifestyle habits so you can continue to take care of your heart.

Even if you think your heart is 'fixed' after a successful heart procedure or treatment, cardiac rehab is important to keep your heart healthy and prevent another heart event in the future.

The cardiac rehab programme will cover many aspects of your health and will take place over a number of weeks. It will address your risk factors, medications, diet and physical activity. However, it is important to understand that cardiac rehab is an ongoing process to help you stay well. This programme will help you develop long-term strategies for living well.



"I would strongly encourage you to attend your local cardiac rehabilitation programme. It has been shown that people living with certain heart conditions who complete cardiac rehabilitation live longer, feel better and are much less likely to have cardiac problems in the future."

Dr Angie Brown
Medical Director, Irish Heart Foundation.

Who can take part in cardiac rehab?

Cardiac rehab can help people who have:

- had a heart attack, coronary artery bypass graft surgery or a stent placed in their heart
- undergone heart valve repair or replacement
- had a heart transplant
- spontaneous coronary artery dissection

It can also help people living with heart conditions (like angina that is currently stable) and those living with stable heart failure. It is designed to improve your heart health and reduce the risk of future heart events.



How can cardiac rehab help me?

Cardiac rehab is an important part of recovery. It can help in the following ways:

Empowers you – Cardiac rehab helps you to play an active role in managing your condition. It can boost your confidence and empower you to manage your recovery and health.

Teaches you how to exercise safely – You will learn how to spot any warning signs if your symptoms get worse and learn how to exercise in a way that works for you.

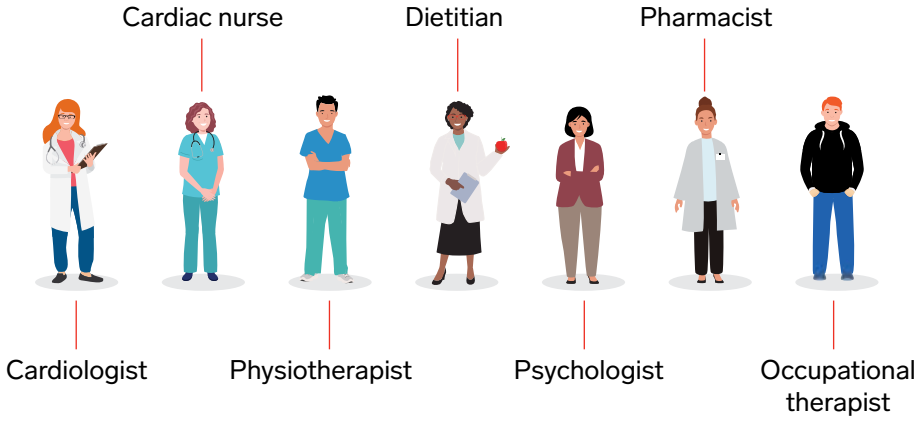
Teaches you about heart health – Cardiac rehab will cover topics like healthy eating, medications, understanding cholesterol and blood pressure, managing stress, anxiety, sleep and how to take care of yourself.

Supports you – Living through a heart event or receiving a heart diagnosis can be scary. Cardiac rehab can help restore confidence. Meeting others who have shared similar experiences has been shown to provide valuable support during this time. Cardiac rehab can connect you with support services like counselling or local support groups if you need them.

How can I join a cardiac rehab programme?

You will be contacted by the cardiac rehab team while you are in hospital or after you have been discharged. You will be fully assessed before you start a programme. If you have not been contacted by the cardiac rehab team, your doctor can refer you.

At your first assessment, the cardiac rehab team will check how you are recovering and review your physical and emotional health. They will also review any medications that you are taking. Working with the cardiac rehab team, you will set goals for your recovery, and you will be asked how you'd like to take part in the programme.



The cardiac rehab team and how they help

The cardiac rehab team is made up of a group of healthcare professionals who work together to support you in your recovery.

Your cardiac rehab team may include:

Cardiologists (heart doctors) – These are doctors who understand your condition and can help you manage heart-related issues you may have.

Cardiac rehab nurse specialists – Cardiac rehab nurse specialists can offer advice on how you can look after your health and how to take your medications.

Physiotherapists – Physiotherapists will show you how to exercise safely and will help you to build your strength and fitness.

Dietitians – Dietitians will give you advice on healthy eating and show you how you can support your heart health through your diet.

Psychologists – These can help you manage any emotional challenges that may come up during your recovery. They will be able to help you with feelings of anxiety or stress.

Pharmacists – Will help you understand your medications, any side effects and will make sure you're taking them correctly.

Occupational therapists – Will help you to adapt to any changes in your mobility or daily life after a heart event. They will help you get back to your normal routine.

Your cardiac rehab team is there to listen and to support you, answer your questions and help you achieve your goals.

What happens at cardiac rehab?

Cardiac rehab is about working with your cardiac rehab team to set goals that will help you get stronger and healthier, and lower your chances of having another heart event or more heart problems in the future.

Your goals may include:

- being more active
- learning how to manage your emotional wellbeing
- adopting a heart-healthy diet and maintaining a healthy weight
- taking your medications properly and understanding how they work
- stopping smoking
- improving your sleep habits

Making changes can be difficult. Your cardiac rehab team will create a plan with you. This plan may include:

- supervised exercise that suits your unique needs and ability
- information and education sessions to help you understand your condition and how you can best take care of yourself
- support to help you set and achieve your goals

Your plan may also include access to psychological support if needed or referrals to other health specialists.

> Cardiac rehab is much more than physical rehabilitation, it is an essential part of a holistic treatment plan."
>
> **Mary**



Notes...



The cardiac rehab programme

The cardiac rehab programme

In this chapter, we outline the steps involved in the cardiac rehabilitation programme.

Assessment

Your cardiac rehab team will assess you first. This allows your team to understand what your needs are, so they can tailor the programme to suit you. It's also helpful to get a baseline of your health so you can better track your progress as you move through the cardiac rehab programme.

Your cardiac rehab team may do the following tests:

Exercise assessment – Depending on your ability, this may involve walking on a treadmill, cycling on a bike or a six-minute walk test. Your heart rate and blood pressure will be monitored. Your cardiac rehab team will assess you in the way that's best for you.

Strength testing – You may be asked to lift some light weights or use a special handgrip testing device so the team can measure your strength.

Risk factor assessment – You will be asked about your medical history, any medications you are taking, your daily exercise, eating and sleeping habits and if you have a history of smoking. These may have contributed to your cardiac condition and are called 'risk factors.' You may also be asked to complete questionnaires about your emotional wellbeing.

The cardiac rehab team will also assess your understanding of your diagnosis and speak to you about any potential barriers to cardiac rehabilitation.

This information will help your team tailor the programme and assist you in setting heart-healthy goals.

"The greatest gift the cardiac rehab programme and staff gave me was confidence – confidence to push myself in a safe, supportive environment. Confidence to resume moderate exercise including golf, and most importantly, confidence to find myself again after bypass surgery."

Patrick



The cardiac rehab programme

Once your assessment is complete, your cardiac rehab team will design a cardiac rehab programme for you. In general, the programme will take place over a number of weeks. During your sessions, your cardiac rehab team will monitor your blood pressure, heartbeat and how you feel. Exercise training can vary depending on your level of fitness and any other issues you may have.

As you complete more sessions, the cardiac rehab team will show you how to safely increase the intensity or length of time you exercise.

Exercises may include aerobic exercises, like walking or using an exercise bike and strength exercises, like lifting weights or using resistance bands.

You'll also take part in education sessions where you'll learn about things like cardiac risk factors, heart medicines, cholesterol and how to lead a heart-healthy lifestyle. All of this will help to reduce your risk of future heart problems.



What happens when I complete the programme?

At the end of the programme, the cardiac rehab team may reassess your exercise capacity to measure how much your fitness has improved since you began.

A progress report will be sent to your doctor and cardiologist.

The cardiac rehab team will also talk to you about how to maintain the healthy changes you have made and direct you to any other supports or programmes available that might help.



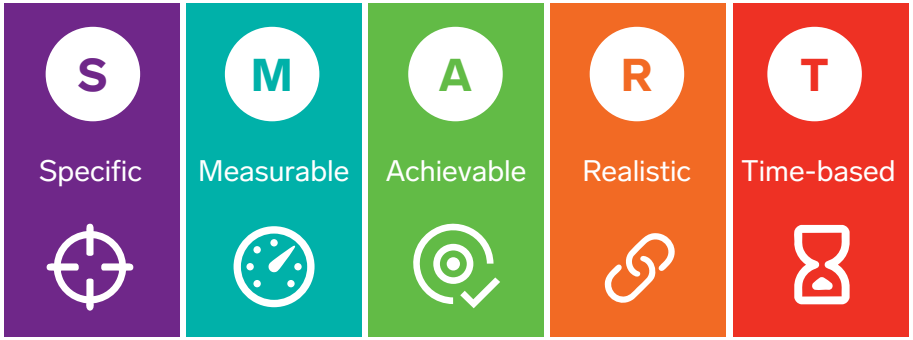
Maintenance

After you have finished your cardiac rehab programme, it's important to keep exercising regularly and leading a heart-healthy lifestyle. You should also see your doctor regularly for blood pressure and cholesterol checks. Doing this will help protect your heart and reduce your risk of future heart problems.

In some areas there are special maintenance cardiac rehab programmes that you can join after you finish your main programme. These might take place in a local community centre.

You may prefer to exercise by yourself, undertaking activities such as walking, cycling, dancing, tennis, swimming or hill walking. Or you may want to attend a gym in your locality. There may be local activity groups such as walking groups and community dance classes that you could attend. The most important thing is that you continue to exercise.

Whatever you decide to do, it helps to set clear, achievable goals that allow you to make progress. These kinds of goals are often called **SMART goals**. SMART stands for:



Set your SMART goals in the appendix.

How can I get the most out of cardiac rehab?

- **Have confidence in your ability** – After a heart event or heart diagnosis it is normal to feel afraid or anxious when moving again. Your cardiac rehab team is there to support you, and the cardiac rehab programme will help you build confidence in your ability.
- **Ask questions** – If you don't understand what you're doing or why, ask your cardiac rehab team. They are there to help you.
- **Set realistic goals** – Ask yourself what you think you can achieve and then break these goals down into smaller steps. Your cardiac rehab team will help you set goals that work for you.
- **Practice makes perfect** – Continue to exercise as you were advised by your cardiac rehab team. Doing all your exercises regularly will help you improve your fitness levels.
- **Involve your family and friends** – Talk to your loved ones. They can join you as you exercise at home once you have been discharged from the cardiac rehab programme.
- **Take your time** – Take breaks when you need to. Make sure you're getting enough rest. Be kind to yourself as you work through your exercises and make heart-healthy lifestyle changes.
- **Celebrate** – Progress is not easy. Sometimes you may feel like you are going backwards. Keep a written or video diary to remind you of all the progress you're making.
- **Connect with others** – Connecting with other heart patients or people in your cardiac rehab programme can be helpful. You can support each other as you take part in the programme.

Call the Irish Heart Foundation Nurse Support Line on **01 668 5001** or visit irishheart.ie to see supports where you can meet other heart patients.

Look after your emotional wellbeing

A heart event doesn't just affect your body – it can have a big impact on how you feel and your mental health. Recovery is not just about physical healing, it is also about making sense of what happened and finding your way back to feeling like yourself again.

In cardiac rehab, emotional recovery is just as important as physical recovery, and your cardiac rehab team will help to support you through both of these journeys.

Everyone reacts differently after they have had a heart event or received a heart diagnosis. Some people may seem unaffected but other people may feel terrified or like their life has changed considerably. There is no right or wrong way to feel and however you feel is valid.

It is normal to feel a mix of emotions, such as:



Shock or disbelief – It might not feel real. You may find yourself thinking, "how did this happen?"



Anxiety or fear – You may be afraid of having another heart event or anxious about the future.



Anger or guilt – You may feel angry or blame yourself for what you did or didn't do before you got sick.



Sadness or grief – Lots of people worry about how their life may need to change or mourn the life they used to lead.

You may also begin to experience the following:

- **Increased awareness of your body** – After a heart event or diagnosis, it is normal to notice every new ache or sensation in your body, especially in your chest. This can feel unsettling or distressing.
- **Sleep changes or difficulties** – You may find it hard (or be afraid) to fall asleep or you might wake up during the night with your mind racing. Some people notice that they want to sleep more than usual.
- **Wanting to be alone** – Some people find that they want to be on their own more or just mix with their loved ones.
- **Feeling isolated** – Even with support around you, it is easy to feel like no one understands what you have been through and what you are going through as you recover.
- **Feelings of stress** – The link between stress and heart health is complex. Ongoing stress can damage your heart over time. As part of your cardiac rehab, you will learn effective ways to manage stress, helping you feel more in control. For more information on stress, see irishheart.ie/how-to-keep-your-heart-healthy/stress
- **Relationship changes** – You may feel like your role in your family or your other relationships has changed. Lots of people find it hard to balance keeping their independence while accepting help and care from family and loved ones as they recover.

Cardiac rehab offers a safe space to work through these feelings, with people who understand. Healing takes time, but you will find a new sense of normal and grow stronger in the process. If you are struggling after you complete your cardiac rehab programme, ask your cardiac rehab team about post-programme support.

> The programme provided lots of support, friendship and banter which has lasted to this day. There was reassurance and comfort in meeting others who were facing the same challenges."
>
> **Paul**



Notes...



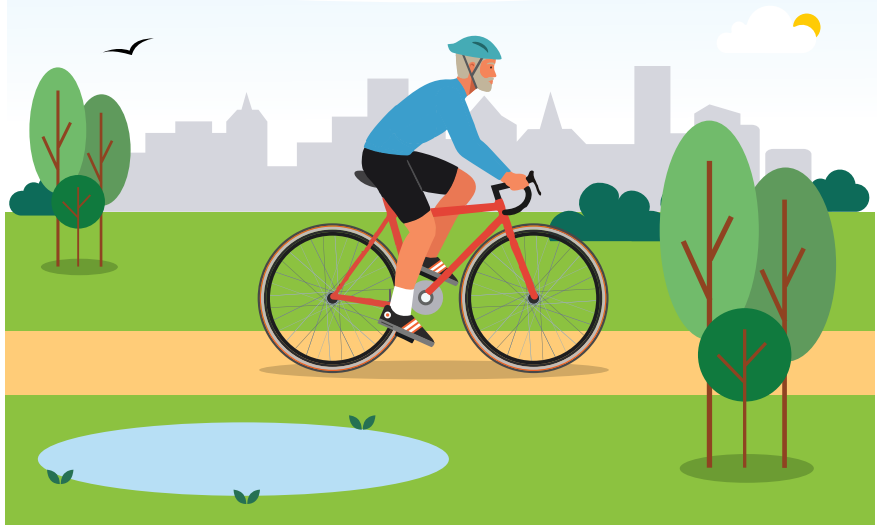
Keeping your heart healthy

Keeping your heart healthy

As you take part in cardiac rehab, it is important to practise the healthy habits that you learn during the programme and to set small, realistic goals for your health and wellbeing.

In this chapter, we will talk about the steps you can take in your everyday life to protect your heart and to feel better and stronger.

> The best thing I learned through the cardiac rehab programme is that heart damage doesn't mean that I can't have a healthy, active lifestyle."
>
> **Duncan**



Physical activity

Physical activity has many health and wellbeing benefits. However, you may be concerned about the risks of moving more.

After a heart event or diagnosis, you may notice that things have changed. Your energy levels might feel different and you may have been prescribed new or different medications to help you manage your condition. Both of these things can affect your tolerance for exercise. It is important to listen to your body.

Before you start moving again, it is important to check in with your doctor (or your cardiac rehab team) and increase your activity slowly over time. Taking a slow approach will help set you up for success.

Try to avoid sitting for long stretches of time each day. Sitting too much – even if you exercise later – can increase your risk of developing heart disease and type 2 diabetes. It can also affect your posture and lead to pain in your back, neck and hips. Sitting too much slows down your metabolism, which can lead to weight gain over time. If you need to sit down for a long time, make sure you get up regularly and move around for a few minutes.

Aim to move your body most days of the week – ideally every day. Even light activity counts. Balance and strength exercises are also an important part of your daily routine. Speak to your cardiac rehab team for advice.

If you experience symptoms, see the **Appendix** for helpful advice.

Why regular movement is good for you

Moving more helps:

- protect your heart and blood vessels
- boost your balance, strength and energy
- lower your stress levels
- improve your mood
- support your immune system
- improve your blood pressure
- lower your bad cholesterol
- improve your sleep and emotional wellbeing
- increase your quality and length of life
- improve your blood sugar control
- manage your weight



How to get started with movement

Getting more movement in your daily life does not mean that you need to join a gym or sports team. Every bit of movement counts. From gardening to chair-based exercises and walking, it is important to find a type of movement you enjoy – healthyireland.ie have some suggestions that may be helpful.

Understanding different levels of activity

After a heart event or diagnosis, it is important to understand how different levels of activity might feel so you can choose what type of activity is right for you.

It is helpful to get into the habit of tuning in to how your body feels during activity. Your cardiac rehab team can guide you on which level is safe and effective for you.



Very light activity
Hardly any exertion, but more than watching TV or sleeping.



Light activity
Easy to breathe and to talk to others.



Moderate activity
Heavy breathing during exercise but can hold a short conversation.



Vigorous activity
Short of breath, can only speak a sentence or two.



Max effort activity
Completely out of breath. Impossible to keep going.

Key stages in every exercise session

Every exercise session should include 3 main stages: a warm-up, the main activity and a cool-down. These steps help you to move safely.

Warm-up
(5-10 minutes)

- Gently eases your body into movement
- Increases your heart rate, gets your muscles ready and helps to prevent injury
- Can include slow walking and gentle stretches



Main activity
(30 minutes minimum per day, or 150 minutes per week)

- The core part of your exercise
- Raises your heart rate to a safe level
- Improves your overall fitness
- Always follow the advice of your cardiac rehab team about how hard and how long you should exercise for



Cool-down
(5-10 minutes)

3



- Just as important as warming up
- Helps your heart rate and breathing to gently return to normal
- Finish with gentle movement and stretches to relax your muscles and avoid injury

1 2 3

Including these 3 stages in all your exercise sessions will help you to stay safe, feel better and enjoy your activity.



If you ever feel unwell during any part of your exercise session, stop and let your cardiac rehab team or doctor know.

Healthy eating

A heart-healthy diet like the Mediterranean diet can help to reduce the risk of further heart problems and support you in your recovery.

Create a routine: Getting into a regular eating routine can help you keep your energy steady throughout the day. Make sure you are eating 3 main meals a day, with healthy snacks if needed.

Having breakfast is important, especially if you are taking medication for your heart.

Build a balanced meal:

- Aim to fill half your plate with vegetables, salad or fruit.
- Aim to fill a quarter of your plate with high-fibre, starchy foods like oats, brown rice or wholegrain bread.
- Aim to fill the remaining quarter of your plate with heart-healthy, high protein foods like beans, lentils, fish, lean poultry or meat.

¼ plate heart-healthy high protein (beans, lentils, fish, lean poultry or meat)



½ plate vegetables, salad or fruit

¼ plate high-fibre starchy foods (oats, brown rice or wholegrain bread)



Have at least 5-7 portions of fruit and vegetables every day:

- Fresh, frozen, tinned and dried all count. A portion is 80 grams of fresh, frozen or tinned fruit and vegetables, or 30 grams of dried fruit.



Cut down on salt:

- Limiting salt to no more than 6 grams per day can help to reduce the workload on your heart and lower your blood pressure.
- In Ireland, only a quarter of the salt we eat comes from what we add at the table or in cooking. The rest is already in the foods – especially processed ones.
- That's why it makes sense to choose fresh, minimally processed foods when you can, and try to limit foods that are very salty or heavily processed.



Choose heart-healthy fats:

- Include olive oil, rapeseed oil, unsalted nuts, plant-based spreads and nut butter.
- Include oily fish like salmon or mackerel twice a week. Fresh, frozen and tinned count. Opt for unbattered and non-breadcrumbed fish. When using tinned fish, choose fish tinned in water or tomato sauce.
- Limit sources of saturated fat such as coconut oil, palm oil, butter, cream, fried foods and processed or fatty meats.



Be mindful of alcohol and caffeine:

- Alcohol can raise your heart rate, cause irregular heartbeats (arrhythmias), damage your heart and stop certain medications from working properly.
- Speak to your doctor about your alcohol intake. After a heart event or diagnosis, you may be advised to stop drinking completely.
- Caffeine can also cause changes to your heart's rhythm. Speak to your doctor or dietitian about your caffeine intake and if you need to reduce it.



Your dietary needs will be unique to you. Speak to your doctor or a dietitian for individual advice.



Your cardiac rehab team can also signpost you to resources and supports.



For more information on a heart-healthy lifestyle, see irishheart.ie/how-to-keep-your-heart-healthy.

Aim for your best weight

Your 'best weight' is the weight you reach when you're living the healthiest life you can truly enjoy and sustain long-term. This can lower your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

Tips to support your best weight:

- Build sustainable habits. Quick fixes don't work. Focus on small, consistent changes.
- Try to add more movement into your daily life.
- Prioritise sleep – Get 7-9 hours every night.
- Plan meals, shop with a list and eat at regular times.
- Manage your stress.
- Notice your progress beyond the scales – Do you have more energy? Do you feel better? Has your sleep improved?
- Listen to your body and respond to hunger and fullness signals.
- If your weight is affecting your health, talk to your doctor or dietitian and ask for help.

For more support, visit irishheart.ie

Quit smoking or vaping

Quitting smoking is one of the most important things you can do for your heart health. Smoking doubles your risk of heart attack and stroke.

Once you stop smoking, your mental and physical health improves.

Within **20 minutes** of your last cigarette, your heart rate and blood pressure begin to return to normal.

Over time, your risk of heart disease and stroke drops significantly.

After **a few weeks**, your circulation improves and your lungs begin to heal.

What about vaping and other nicotine products?

E-cigarettes, vapes and other nicotine products may have less chemicals than regular cigarettes, but they can still cause heart and health problems. If you vape or use other nicotine products, you should try to stop. The HSE does not recommend vaping to help you quit smoking.

Quitting isn't always easy, but you are not alone. Your cardiac rehab team can offer support to help you stop smoking. Every smoke-free day helps protect your heart and supports your recovery.

For more information on quitting, you can also freephone the National Smokers' Quitline on **1800 201 203** or visit quit.ie.

Sleep

Getting good-quality sleep is an important part of recovery, especially if you have had a heart event or received a heart diagnosis. If you are struggling with sleep, speak to your doctor.

During cardiac rehab, you will learn tips to improve your sleep and understand how rest plays a key role in looking after your heart.

Tips to improve your sleep:

- Stick with a regular sleep schedule. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. A consistent routine will help you to feel sleepy at the same time each night.
- Move more for sleep. Daily movement is essential for good sleep quality and helps to reduce feelings of stress. Get your movement in every day and try not to exercise within 2-3 hours of bedtime.
- Napping during the day can cause sleep problems, particularly if you are over the age of 60. Avoid napping if you can. If you need to nap, limit them to 20 minutes and try not to nap after 3pm.
- Limit caffeine. Coffee, energy drinks, chocolate and certain teas all contain caffeine which is a stimulant. Try to avoid caffeine in the afternoons.
- Relax before bedtime. An hour before you turn off the light, engage in quiet and relaxing activities like reading or listening to soft music.

Medications

Medications play a critical role in your recovery and help to prevent another cardiac event in the future. Your doctor may prescribe medications for the following reasons, for example to:

- lower your (LDL) or 'bad' cholesterol levels
- lower your blood pressure
- prevent blood clots
- slow your heart rate
- reduce the workload on your heart
- improve your heart's ability to pump blood around your body
- prevent abnormal heartbeats (arrhythmias)
- reduce the risk of fluid build-up in your body

It is important to tell your doctor about any medication or supplements you are currently taking (such as inhalers, pain medication or viagra). Do not stop taking any prescribed medication unless your doctor has told you otherwise.

If you have any questions or concerns about your medication, speak to your doctor and pharmacist or your cardiac rehab team.

For more information on heart medicines, read our booklet **Step by Step through Heart Medicines** or see irishheart.ie.

How to stay on track with medications

It can feel overwhelming trying to manage medications at first, especially if you are not used to taking daily medicines.

Here are some tips that can help:

- Go to the same pharmacy for your refills if possible. This will allow your pharmacist to get to know you and your prescription. It will also make it easier to check your medication history and keep everything organised.
- Get a pill box organiser.
- Ask your pharmacist to blister pack your medications.
- Some pharmacies offer a home delivery service for medications if you can't get to the pharmacy. Speak to your pharmacist for details.
- Set an alarm on your phone to remind you to take your medications.
- Keep an updated list of your medications, the dose and how often you need to take them. Keep this list on your phone or in your wallet for easy reference. Remember to update it if your medication changes.

If you're having trouble taking medications properly or are experiencing side effects, be sure to discuss these concerns with your doctor. They can give you advice and may adjust your medication accordingly.

Always keep taking your medication as prescribed unless your doctor tells you to stop.

Know your numbers

Knowing your key health numbers (pulse rate, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar) helps you keep track of your heart health. These numbers help you and your healthcare team to understand your risk of future heart problems and help track how well your treatment and lifestyle changes are working.

Get regular health checks so you can keep track of your numbers.

This will help you:

- spot changes early and know if you need to take action
- see the benefits when you make heart-healthy lifestyle changes

You can get heart health checks done by a doctor or nurse. Some local pharmacies also do them.

Pulse rate

Your pulse shows how fast your heart is beating. A regular, steady pulse is a sign of good heart health.

Blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. High blood pressure happens when your heart has to work harder to pump blood around your body. Over time, it can increase your risk of heart failure or heart attack.

Keeping your blood pressure within a healthy range gives your heart the best chance to recover and stay strong.

Your cardiac rehab team can help you learn how to manage your blood pressure.

Cholesterol

Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) is our 'bad' cholesterol. High LDL cholesterol levels can cause fatty plaques to build up in your arteries.

Too much LDL (or 'bad') cholesterol can cause these plaques to block blood flow in your arteries and raise your risk of heart attack or stroke. The goal is to keep LDL as low as possible for as long as possible. Prescribed medication can help if you need it.

During cardiac rehab, you will learn simple ways to manage your cholesterol through taking medication following a heart-healthy diet, exercising and other lifestyle changes.

Blood sugar

High blood sugar increases your risk of developing type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Ask your doctor what your target level should be.



To learn more about blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar, see irishheart.ie

Dealing with fatigue

Fatigue is when you feel a kind of tiredness that does not get better with rest. You may feel fatigued as you recover.

Fatigue can be caused by a heart event, but it can also be caused by the stress and emotional upheaval you might be feeling since the event or since receiving a heart diagnosis. Lack of sleep can also contribute to your feeling of tiredness. Some medications can also have side effects that cause tiredness. These effects may wear off as your body adjusts to the new medicines. So, keep taking your medication.

Fatigue can affect your quality of life and can be difficult, as family and friends may not understand how exhausted you are.

You can help reduce fatigue by doing the following:



Accept fatigue as being part of your recovery. It will improve. Make sure you are giving yourself the time and space that you need to rest and relax. Just because you feel fatigued now, it does not mean that you will always feel this way. Many people find that their fatigue does gradually improve.



Schedule your activities for when you feel most energetic.

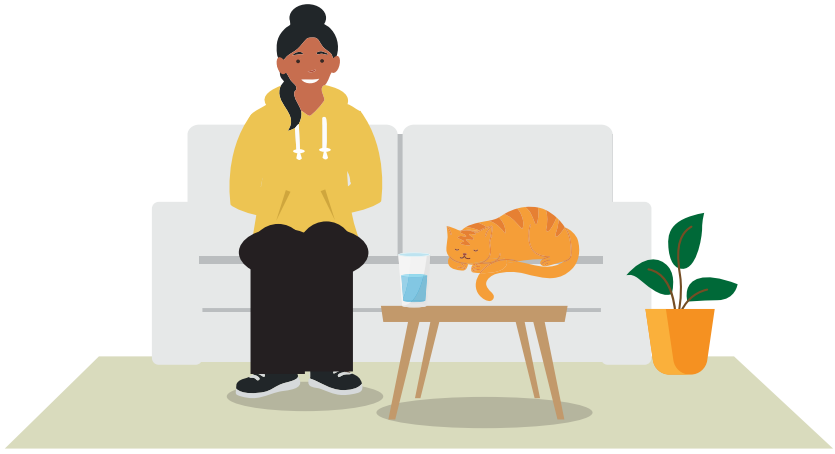


Talk to your family and friends about how you are feeling.

Don't hesitate to ask your cardiac rehab team about what else you can do to help manage your fatigue.

Since my diagnosis of heart failure, I have tried daily to be more active. I'm not sporty but I try to move more everyday. Some days I'm just not able to, so on these days I rest and try not to feel guilty as I know tomorrow or the next day I'll be back exercising again."

Ann



Step by step through cardiac rehabilitation

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Irish Heart Foundation



Making the most of your life

Making the most of your life

After a cardiac event or diagnosis, it is important to focus on living well, making lifestyle changes that help you feel good and enjoying life again with your family, friends and loved ones.

Sex and relationships

Getting back to everyday life – including intimacy and relationships – is an important part of your recovery. If you are wondering when it is safe for you to have sex again, speak to your doctor.

In general, if you are able to climb two flights of stairs or walk briskly for several minutes without symptoms like chest pain, breathlessness or feeling dizzy or faint, it is usually safe for you to have sex again. But everyone is different, so it is important to check with your doctor or speak to your cardiac rehab team if you are unsure.

You might notice changes in your sex life after a heart event or after you have received a heart diagnosis. It is common to feel anxious and notice changes to your sex drive or, if you are a man, to experience difficulties like erectile dysfunction. You are not alone. These issues are common, and your doctor or cardiac rehab team can help by offering support, advice and treatment options.

Work and social welfare

Your condition may affect your work depending on your symptoms and the severity of them. It also depends on the kind of work you do.

Speak to your healthcare team about the work you do and whether you can continue doing it. You may be advised to take some time off work until you recover. Be kind to yourself. Give yourself time to follow any treatment or rehabilitation therapy you have been given.

Returning to work

If you have had to take some time off work and you are now thinking of returning to work:

- Speak to your doctor first to make sure you are well enough to go back to work.
- Next, speak to your cardiac rehab team about the fitness level required for returning to work, especially if your job involves lots of physical activity.
- When you have been cleared by your doctor to return to work, contact your employer to discuss options for a gradual return. You may not want to work full-time.
- Returning to work may impact on any social welfare payments and entitlements you receive. Contact your local Social Welfare Office, Citizens Information or your Employee Assistance Programme, if you have one.



Contact our **Nurse Support Line** on **01 668 5001** for information on returning to work.

What if I can't go back to work?

If you have been advised that you will not be able to go back to a paid job, that can be very hard to adjust to. Not being able to work can make you feel like you have lost your identity and ability to contribute. You may worry about your family's financial circumstances.

You can use this time to re-evaluate what you want out of life You may want to:

- do some volunteering
- develop new hobbies
- return to education
- start your own business



You can also receive **financial support** from the government if you can't go back to work.

You may also like to speak to an **Irish Heart Foundation vocational support counsellor** to find activities that are meaningful and fulfilling for you. See irishheart.ie/support-for-you.

Benefits you may be entitled to

Here are some key social welfare supports available that may help if you have been diagnosed with a heart condition. For more information on supports and benefits, contact your local social welfare office or visit citizensinformation.ie.

Illness Benefit – This is a weekly payment you may get if you can't work due to your illness. In order to get Illness Benefit, you must have enough PRSI contributions.

Supplementary Welfare Allowance – If you do not qualify for Illness Benefit, you may be able to get a Supplementary Welfare Allowance. You may also be able to get this if you are waiting to find out if you qualify for Illness Benefit.

Partial Capacity Benefit – This payment is available to people who have been receiving Illness Benefit for a minimum of six months. It offers support to people who cannot return to full-time work because of their illness, but who have been medically cleared to work part-time. You will need to be medically assessed for this benefit. For details, visit citizensinformation.ie.

Invalidity Pension – This support is available for people who cannot work due to a long-term illness or disability. You must have enough PRSI contributions for this support.

Carer's Allowance/Carer's Benefit – If you need a lot of support from a family member, they may be able to get Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

Medical Card/GP Visit Card – Depending on your medical situation and your income, you may be able to qualify for a medical card or a GP Visit Card. Both of these supports are means tested.

Drug Payment Scheme – This support limits the cost of medications for you and your family to €80 per month, making costs easier to manage. Anyone living in Ireland can apply and there is no means test for this support. You can apply online at mydps.ie.

Long-term Illness Scheme – The Long-term Illness Scheme provides free medications and medical and surgical appliances for the treatment of certain medical conditions. This support is not means tested, although you should only apply for the scheme if you have been diagnosed with one or more long-term diseases or disabilities. For more information, see: citizensinformation.ie/en/health/drugs-and-medicines/long-term-illness-scheme/

Driving

If you have been diagnosed with a heart condition or if you have experienced a heart event, you may be wondering when it is safe to start driving again. The National Driver License Service (NDLS) and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) have specific rules and guidance for people with heart conditions. These rules depend on your condition, how serious it is and whether you are having any symptoms.

It is really important to talk to your doctor first. They will be able to tell you if it is safe for you to start driving again.

The NDLS offers an overview of driving with heart conditions on their website. Visit ndls.ie/medical-fitness.

If you need it, you can apply for a disabled person's parking card. This is a permit that allows you to park in disabled parking spaces. You can contact the Disabled Drivers Association of Ireland (DDAI) and the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA).



Insurance and travel

Health insurance

If you have had a cardiac event and you already have health insurance, speak to your insurer directly regarding your level of coverage.

If you have had a cardiac event and you want to purchase health insurance, you may be subject to a maximum waiting period of 5 years before claims related to your heart condition are covered. Speak to your chosen insurer directly and they will be able to advise you.

Some health insurers offer plans that provide additional coverage for people living with a heart condition.

If you have been diagnosed with a heart condition, speak to your doctor about the types of treatment you are likely to need in the future.

Once you know the types of treatment you are likely to need, it's a good idea to get multiple quotes from different insurers. Compare what each of them is offering and if it suits your personal situation before you sign up.

You should also ask your doctor to give you a letter of diagnosis. You may need to give this to the insurance company as part of your application.

You can also access care through the public health system. In emergency situations, your care will be prioritised but routine management of your condition and access to diagnostic tests or screening may be impacted by long waiting lists.

Travel insurance

Travel insurance is essential for peace of mind when travelling with a heart condition. It is important to get quotes from multiple travel insurers and carefully review what is covered in each policy.

If you have been diagnosed with a heart condition, you should also ask your doctor for a letter of diagnosis as the insurance company may ask you for one as part of your application.

The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) allows you to access healthcare abroad for free or at a reduced cost. You can apply for an EHIC online at mymedicalcard.ie.



If you have an EHIC, it's important to note that while this card grants public healthcare access in EU countries, it does not replace travel insurance.



"The cardiac rehab experience brought me from being a nervous, feeble person facing an uncertain future of very restricted movement and experiences to an invigorated man who is now looking forward to many years of a mentally fulfilling, energetic and confident future."

Michael

Air travel

If your heart condition is under control and you feel well, it is usually ok to go on holiday. Check with your doctor if it's safe for you to go.

- Get a letter from your doctor explaining:
    1. your condition
    2. what medicines you need and why
    3. if you have any medical devices like an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD)
- Carry phone numbers of your doctor and family members
- Make note of local emergency numbers and how to get medical help in your holiday destination
- Make sure you bring all the medicines you need to last you throughout the holiday – keep them in your hand luggage

Airport assistance

If you have reduced mobility as a result of your heart condition, you can ask your airline about mobility assistance while you travel.
It is also a good idea to contact your departure/arrival airport and ask about their mobility assistance supports.

Most airports will be able to provide support for passengers with reduced mobility, although you will need to give notice before you travel to ensure you can access the type of assistance you need.

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a discreet symbol that someone has a hidden or non-visible disability that may need extra help.

The lanyard has become widely recognised in airports, on public transportation and in public spaces. Staff in participating locations are trained to recognise the lanyard and offer assistance. See hdsunflower.com/irl



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Appendix

My healthcare team

Write down the names of the members of your healthcare team (for example, cardiologist, hospital nurse, public health nurse, general practitioner (GP), psychologist, occupational therapist (OT), dietitian, etc.)

Healthcare professional	Name and contact details

Step by step through cardiac rehabilitation

Healthcare professional	Name and contact details

My goals

Jot down your short-term, medium-term and long-term cardiac rehab goals. Make sure your goals are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound).

Do this in consultation with your cardiac rehab team. Remember, every heart event and diagnosis is different so your recovery will be unique.

Short-term goals	Medium-term goals	Long-term goals
Learn my cardiac risk factors	Exercise for 30 minutes at my target heart rate, 3-5 times per week	Quit smoking to improve my heart health

Step by step through cardiac rehabilitation

Short-term goals	Medium-term goals	Long-term goals

My timeline of medical appointments and procedures



Medical appointments, procedures and other interactions with healthcare	Date
I met with my cardiologist	

My medicine list

Name of medicine	
What is it for?	
Dosage (amount to be taken)	
Frequency (number of times in a day)	
Prescribed by?	

Name of medicine	
What is it for?	
Dosage (amount to be taken)	
Frequency (number of times in a day)	
Prescribed by?	

Name of medicine	
What is it for?	
Dosage (amount to be taken)	
Frequency (number of times in a day)	
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Frequency (number of times in a day)	
Prescribed by?	

Name of medicine	
What is it for?	
Dosage (amount to be taken)	
Frequency (number of times in a day)	
Prescribed by?	

What should I do if I experience symptoms?

It is normal for people who have heart disease to experience chest pain or discomfort now and then.

If you feel:



a crushing pain, heaviness or tightness in your chest



sweaty



short of breath



lightheaded



pain in your arm, throat, neck, jaw, back or stomach



nausea

Then:

1. Stop what you are doing.
2. Sit down and rest. Sometimes resting can relieve any pain or discomfort.
3. If you have been prescribed a GTN spray, take 1 spray under your tongue and wait 5 minutes.
4. If you are still experiencing pain, take a second spray. A maximum of 3 sprays of GTN can be taken over 15 minutes. Stay sitting down, as GTN can cause dizziness.
5. If the pain does not ease after your third spray, call **999** or **112** and ask for an ambulance.
6. If you do not have a GTN spray, sit and rest. If you are still experiencing pain and discomfort after 5-10 minutes, call **999** or **112** and ask for an ambulance. Stay resting until the ambulance arrives.

If your pain eases after rest or after taking your GTN spray, but occurs again or more often, speak to your doctor or cardiologist urgently.

It is important to keep a written record of your symptoms and any pain or discomfort. Always tell your doctor or cardiologist about any symptoms that do not feel right.

What do I do if I have signs or symptoms of a cardiac emergency?

If you think you are having a heart attack or cardiac emergency, don't wait. Call **999** or **112** and ask for an ambulance. Never drive if you have chest pain or any symptoms of a cardiac emergency.

How can I be prepared in case of a cardiac emergency?

While you cannot prevent a cardiac emergency, there are steps you can take to be prepared:

- Always follow the advice of your doctor and cardiologist
- Attend all follow up appointments with your doctor and cardiologist
- Take your medications as prescribed
- Live a heart-healthy lifestyle
- Make sure your family and loved ones know and understand the signs and symptoms of heart attack and any warning signs unique to your condition
- Keep an updated list of your prescribed medications and your Eircode in a safe place where it can be found easily during an emergency.

Useful websites

Aware
A national organisation providing free support, education and information to people impacted by anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and related mood conditions.
Aware support line: 1800 804 848
web: aware.ie

British Heart Foundation
A UK-based charity that supports people living with heart and circulatory diseases.
web: bhf.org.uk

Cardiac College
An online programme from the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute and University Health Network in Canada that helps people live and thrive with heart disease.
web: healtheuniversity.ca/en/cardiaccollege

Citizens Information Centres
Offers information on your rights and entitlements.
web: citizensinformation.ie

Croí
A heart and stroke charity with a particular focus on the west of Ireland.
web: croi.ie
email: info@croi.ie

European Society of Cardiology Clinical Practice Guidelines on Cardiac Rehabilitation: What Patients Need to Know
This guide has been designed for patients and their families, and provides information from the clinical guidelines and key areas related to cardiac rehabilitation.

web: https://www.escardio.org/guidelines/clinical-practice-guidelines/guidelines-for-patients/2026-patient-guidelines/

HSE Cardiac Rehabilitation Clinical Action Guide
The HSE Cardiac Rehabilitation Clinical Action Guide has been developed to provide a practical framework for implementing the HSE Model of Care for Integrated Cardiac Rehabilitation (2023) across all phases of the cardiac rehabilitation pathway.

web: about.hse.ie/publications/hcp-hse-cardiac-rehabilitation-clinical-action-guide

HSE Quit Smoking
Offers plans, information and support for quitting smoking.

Quit smoking support line: Freephone 1800 201 203

web: hse.ie/living-well/quit-smoking

ICUSteps
A group set up to provide supports to patients affected by critical illness and their relatives. The group aims to promote a positive outlook for people in recovery.

web: icusteps.ie

email: information@icusteps.ie

Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
The largest counselling and psychotherapy association in Ireland. Offers information and contact details for accredited practitioners.

web: iacp.ie

Irish Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation
Offers resources and useful information about cardiac rehabilitation.

web: iacronline.ie

Irish Coalition for People Living with Obesity
A patient-led organisation offering peer support and education for those living with overweight and obesity.

web: icpobesity.org

Irish Heart Foundation
For 60 years, the Irish Heart Foundation has helped shape heart health in Ireland through prevention, advocacy, education and support. Guided by our purpose to be here for every heartbeat, we continue to work towards a future where fewer lives are affected by heart disease and stroke.

web: irishheart.ie

Nurse Support Line: 01 668 5001

The Samaritans
Charity offering emotional support 24-hours a day, 365 days a year, to anyone who is in distress, lonely, struggling to cope or feeling suicidal.

web: samaritans.org

email: jo@samaritans.org

Samaritans' 24-hour Helpline: 116 123

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Disclaimer

This publication is provided for general information only, and does not constitute medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. If you suspect that you have a medical problem or condition, please seek the advice of a qualified healthcare professional immediately.

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Here for Every Heartbeat

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