

## Heart Attack Recovery (Patient Education - Disease and Procedure)



### Heart Attack Recovery

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### The Basics

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

**What happens after a heart attack?** — After a heart attack, also called a myocardial infarction or "MI," your doctor will make a treatment plan with you. The goal of this plan is to prevent another heart attack and lower your chance of dying prematurely from heart disease.

**Do I need to take medicines?** — Yes. Most people need to take at least 3 heart medicines every day. The medicines you take will depend on your heart condition and how your heart attack was treated. Some heart medicines help prevent chest pain and other heart symptoms. Other heart medicines help prevent future heart attacks and help you live longer. To prevent another heart attack, you will probably need to take aspirin and perhaps a second medicine similar to aspirin, a medicine called a "beta blocker," and a cholesterol-lowering medicine.

If you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes (high blood sugar), your doctor will likely prescribe medicines to treat those conditions. Having untreated high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes can increase your chance of having another heart attack.

It's important to take your medicines exactly the way your doctor says. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any side effects or problems with the medicines. You should also let them know if you can't afford your medicines. There are often ways to solve these problems.

Your doctor might also tell you to **avoid** certain medicines, like nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). NSAIDs include ibuprofen (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (sample brand name: Aleve).

**Do I need to make lifestyle changes?** — You might. After a heart attack, your doctor or nurse will talk with you about:

- **Quitting smoking, if you smoke** – Quitting smoking can lower your chance of getting or dying from heart disease. To stop smoking, some people find it helpful to:
  - Use nicotine patches, gum, or nasal sprays instead of cigarettes – Nicotine is the main drug found in cigarettes.
  - Work with a counselor to find ways to make it easier to quit
  - Take a prescription medicine to reduce cigarette cravings
- **Improving your diet** – Eating the right foods can help keep you healthy. Fruits, vegetables, and foods with fiber can help prevent heart disease and strokes (figure 1). Try to avoid eating foods that can make heart disease worse. These include "trans" fats, which are found in many fast foods. If you are overweight, it's important to lose weight. Losing extra weight lowers your chance of having another heart attack.

- Getting help with anxiety or depression – Some people have these problems after a heart attack. If you are struggling, talk to your doctor or nurse. There are treatments that can help.
- Physical activity – Getting regular exercise can keep your heart healthy. Gentle activity like walking is usually safe. Your doctor or nurse will suggest an exercise program that is safe for you. They might also recommend something called "cardiac rehabilitation," which includes exercise.

**What is cardiac rehabilitation?** — Cardiac rehabilitation, or "cardiac rehab," is a special type of care people receive after having a heart attack. In your cardiac rehab program, doctors, nurses, and other health professionals will teach you how to keep your heart healthy. This includes ways to:

- Exercise safely
- Improve your diet, stop smoking, and control your other health conditions
- Cope with feeling sad or worried after your heart attack

**When can I have sex again?** — Having sex during the first 2 weeks after a heart attack might be more exercise than your doctor recommends. Check with your doctor about when it is safe to start having sex again. The timing will depend on the size of your heart attack, if you had problems after your heart attack, and if you still have symptoms.

After a heart attack, some people are less interested in sex or do not enjoy sex as much. This can be caused by certain heart medicines. It can also happen if people are worried about having a heart attack during sex. If you have problems with sex, let your doctor or nurse know. They might be able to treat those problems.

**When can I drive again and return to work?** — Check with your doctor about when it is safe for you to drive again and return to work. Most people can drive again 1 week after their heart attack. Many people can return to work within 2 weeks of having a heart attack.

**What symptoms should I watch for?** — After you have a heart attack, you should watch for chest pain or symptoms of another heart attack (figure 2). People who have a heart attack have a higher than normal chance of having another heart attack and other heart problems.

If you think you might be having another heart attack, **call for an ambulance right away (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1)**. Do not try to get to the hospital on your own.

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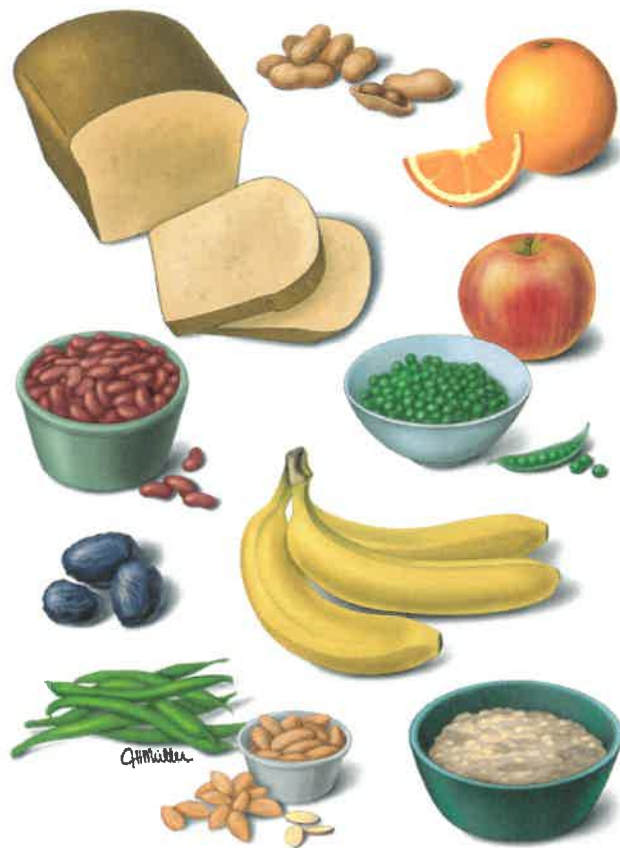
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## Images

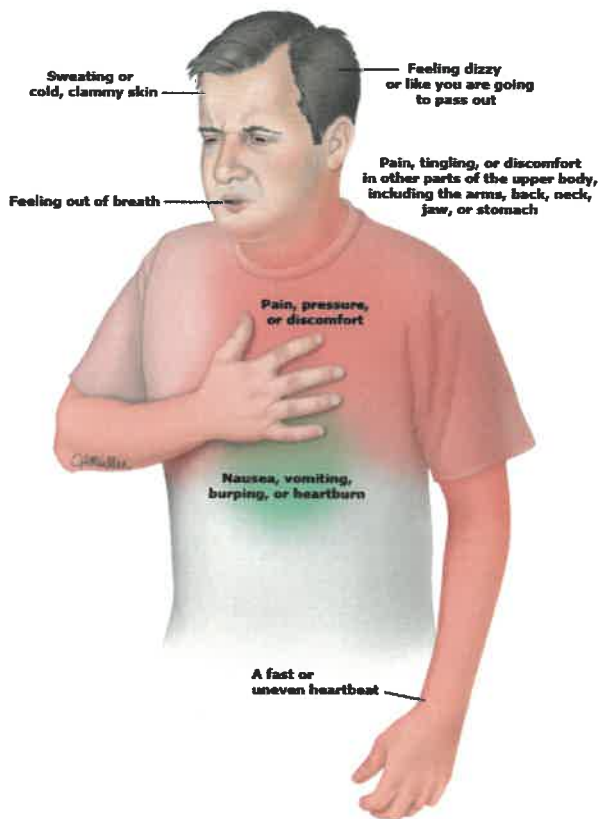
**figure 1: Foods with fiber**



Foods with a lot of fiber include prunes, apples, oranges, bananas, peas, green beans, kidney beans, cooked oatmeal, almonds, peanuts, and whole-wheat bread.

Graphic 79063 Version 1.0

**figure 2: Heart attack symptoms**



This picture shows the main symptoms of a heart attack. People who are having a heart attack often have only some of these symptoms. The pain, pressure, and discomfort caused by a heart attack mostly affect the left side of the body (shown in darker red) but can also affect the right. If you think you are having a heart attack, call 9-1-1 for an ambulance. Do not try to get yourself to the hospital.

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