



HEART-SAFE EXERCISES

In the last decade, a new era has emerged in the treatment of coronary artery disease with the development of coronary revascularization, including percutaneous coronary intervention and coronary artery bypass grafting. People who are recovering from revascularization or experiencing other heart issues often worry that if they have a heart problem then they should take it easy and not exercise, i.e. stress the heart. However, exercise can be an integral part in the treatment plan of many heart conditions.

Physical activity can help reduce risk factors such as abnormal blood chemistry, high blood pressure, being overweight, and stress, as well as improve circulation. The heart, a muscle similar to other muscles, needs to be worked in order to keep it in shape. But prior to starting an exercise program, and on an ongoing basis, a person should discuss limitations with his or her physician and what exercises may be safely undertaken.

So what kinds of exercise should a person do with heart problems? The most common exercise is cardiovascular, aerobic in nature. This type of exercise requires the use of large muscle groups and is repetitive in nature, such as walking, cycling and swimming. One of the most important things to consider is whether you enjoy the activity. Some people enjoy dancing, aerobics classes and climbing stairs while others may enjoy tennis, Pilates and yoga.

American College of Sports Medicine recommends exercise to be most days of the week. Begin with exercising 2-3 alternating days per week with a goal of exercising most days. At first, your exercise sessions may only be 5-10 minutes in length with rest periods as needed and working up to 20-60 minutes of continuous aerobic exercise.

No matter what activity you choose, start with easier exercises for shorter periods, increasing in time first and then intensity as you work towards your goal. Increases can be made every few sessions to every few weeks depending on how you are feeling. If the activity is feeling very light, you may want to increase your time or intensity. But if the activity is very hard, you may want to decrease your time or intensity or both. The rule of thumb is that you should be able to talk while exercising. If you are not able to talk and exercise because of shortness of breath, slow down your pace.

In general, each exercise session should have a warmup and cool down period. Warmup should be gradual and sufficient to increase muscle and tendon temperature without causing fatigue. The best way to start warming up is to perform a low intensity exercise such as walking or bicycling and then incorporate static stretching. Static stretching involves holding each stretch for 15-30 seconds. Avoid bouncing since bouncing may cause muscle injury and remember to breathe normally throughout all exercises. Cooling down is important to gradually return heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature to baseline. A cool down can be as simple as performing the same activity at a lower intensity followed by static stretching.

It doesn't matter what form of exercise you are doing - there are certain signs to stop exercising and consult your doctor, though some may improve by reducing the intensity or taking a break. These signs include the following:

- Chest heaviness, discomfort or pain
- Unusually high or low heart rate
- Abnormal heartbeat
- Excessive or prolonged shortness of breath
- Numbness or tingling in an arm or leg
- Unusually high or low blood pressure
- Illness or fever (not caused by exercise)
- Changes in skin color: blue, white, gray
- Unusual fatigue
- Dizziness and or lightheadedness

Lifestyle therapies, including exercise, are critically important to the overall recovery and long term outcome for people with coronary artery disease. Exercise, when safely undertaken, can be instrumental in improving one's overall sense of well-being and mood during an otherwise difficult time.

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