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Journal

# Life After Heart Attack

The TV Series

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# UNDERSTANDING LIFE AFTER HEART ATTACK

A heart attack, known medically as an acute myocardial infarction or MI, occurs when the blood supply to part of the heart muscle itself is severely reduced or stopped. The reduction or stoppage happens when one or more of the coronary arteries supplying blood to the heart muscle are blocked.

Physically, when a heart attack happens it means at that moment, cells within the heart muscle begin to die because of the interruption in the blood flow to the muscle. This is called coronary occlusion. This occlusion or blockage may be partial or complete. That's the early phase of the heart attack. In the late phase protecting the rest of the heart muscle is vital. Stopping the damage to the heart muscle and tissue after a heart attack occurs are the most crucial and can provide the best chance of survival and recovery.

Each year, more than 1 million men and women suffer a heart attack. Studies show if the sufferer is able to get to a hospital quickly, more than 90% will survive the attack. Today, thanks to improved awareness by the medical community, targeted medications to minimize damage and lifestyle modifications, the chances of making a complete recovery from a first heart attack are greatly improved.

In the past several years, there have been a wide range of medical advancements that are not only working to ensure that a heart attack isn't deadly, but to take steps from it occurring in the first place. The first step for those who are at high risk for a heart attack is prevention, and most physicians agree for patients to:

- Quit smoking (if a patient smokes, or don't start if they are not a smoker)
- Eat a healthy diet (cut out foods high in saturated fats and sodium)
- Control blood sugar (those with diabetes)
- Exercise (at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise 4 times a week)
- Lose weight (if a patient is overweight)
- Control blood pressure (if a patient has hypertension)
- Risk factors for heart attack include, diabetes, smoking, high cholesterol level, high blood pressure, family history of heart attack, atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries), lack of exercise, obesity and male sex.

The next step for people at risk is to fully understand what a heart attack is. It is just as important to distinguish the warning signs of a heart attack as it is to understand what is not a heart attack. Gastro-intestinal pain is often confused with chest discomfort; every episode of chest pain does mean it is a heart attack. Typical warning signs of a heart attack vary between men and women.

## **Symptoms for men include:**

- Tightness in the chest
- Intense Stabbing pain in the chest
- Jaw pain that may radiate to the teeth
- Radiating pain down the arm, typically on the left side
- Shortness of breath
- Cold Sweats
- Heart Palpitations

# DIAGNOSIS & MANAGEMENT

*The symptoms of a heart attack are slightly different in women:*

- Neck and shoulder pain
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Shortness of breath

Because of these different symptoms, women often seek medical care later than do men. However, these symptoms are just guidelines and can vary widely, not only between men and women, but among all individuals. There are also differences between men and women in both the causes and recovery process. Women having a heart attack are more likely than men to be older, have a higher incidence of high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, congestive heart failure, and are less likely to be smokers.

**Diagnosing a heart attack** starts with a family/health history and physical exam. An EKG (electrocardiogram) can help in the diagnosis. Blood tests are done to measure levels of certain enzymes in the bloodstream. Because these enzymes may not rise for several hours after the pain begins, a person with a suspected heart attack is often admitted to a hospital. Rechecks of these levels over a period of time will determine if a heart attack has occurred.

**The sooner treatment begins**, the better the chance the person will survive. Taking an aspirin as early as possible after the onset of pain is very important, aspirin acts as a blood thinner and helps get oxygen-rich blood to the oxygen-deprived heart muscle. Other medications such as beta-blockers, ACE inhibitors and statins are also used to improve the prognosis and prevent subsequent events.

A person who has had a heart attack often undergoes a procedure known as a cardiac catheterization or cardiac angiogram; while others may need to have angioplasty or heart bypass surgery. After recovery from the acute phase of the heart attack, a patient may be enrolled in a cardiac rehabilitation program. This gradual exercise program will help the person safely resume a healthy lifestyle.

A post heart attack patient will need to visit their doctor regularly so medicines can be adjusted and their blood pressure, weight, and other major factors can be monitored. Regular stress EKGs may also be done to make sure there is proper blood flow to the heart.

**There is life following the heart attack.** However many patients suffer a range of emotional issues following the attack ranging from depression to Post Traumatic Stress disorder. While there is still some controversy regarding the use of antidepressants in heart attack patients, the fact that antidepressant medication may impact the recovery of patients is very encouraging. Treating depression in patients who have suffered a heart attack may actually help to reduce subsequent cardiovascular morbidity and even death.

Recognizing the signs of a heart attack and getting the proper medical help quickly is the most important steps to recovery. It is just as crucial for the patient to face the future and take back control of their lives. It may take a multi faceted recovery plan to help make the life after the heart attack better than before. Experts say, for the plan to be most effective, it needs the active participation of the patient, their loved ones and the medical team.

While a heart attack leaves both physical and emotional scars, it doesn't mean the end of life as it was. By implementing lifestyle changes that brought on the heart attack in the first place, can actually be a wake up call improving the health of the patient.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **Q** What percentage of people suffering a heart attack survive?

**A** Approximately 60% of people who suffer from a heart attack survive.

## **Q** How important is it to be emotionally stable following a heart attack?

**A** How a person responds emotionally to the heart attack can greatly influence the quality of the rest of their life. Emotional recovery can be as difficult as the physical recovery.

## **Q** How important is family support to someone who just suffered a heart attack?

**A** Family members, significant others and spouse are very important in terms of helping the patient make lifestyle modifications they may need to make. If they have the support of friends and family that can only enhance their recovery.

## **Q** Is depression a direct result of the attack itself?

**A** A study conducted at Stanford University shows that not only is depression a result of the attack, recognizing and providing treatment is another component of allowing full recovery after a heart attack.

## **Q** Why is exercise so important to heart attack patients?

**A** Exercise strengthens your heart muscle. It can also help you feel more energetic, help you feel more in control of your health and help you lose weight and keep it off. Exercise may also lower your blood pressure and reduce your cholesterol level.

## **Q** If I feel unusual discomfort, how fast should I seek medical attention?

**A** Don't ignore the pain or discomfort. If you think you are having heart problems or a heart attack, get help immediately. The sooner you get treatment, the greater the chance that the doctors can prevent further damage to the heart muscle.

## **Q** What should I do if I think I am having a heart attack?

**A** Go to the hospital right away and chew one regular tablet of aspirin. Do not drive yourself, call an ambulance if necessary.

## **Q** What is a risk profile?

**A** The term, risk profiling, really means doctors being involved with the patient and trying to globally figure someone's risk. A risk profile is developed to provide insight into the risk of suffering an initial heart attack, and to help reduce the odds of suffering subsequent attacks.

## **Q** How difficult is it to get over a heart attack?

**A** The road to recovery can be long and difficult. To fully recover, the person must come to grips with the fact of having just suffered a heart attack. Lifestyle modifications are also vital in the healing process.

## **Q** Is it possible that a heart attack can go undiagnosed?

**A** Yes. A recent study has found that 43% of total heart attacks went undetected because their symptoms were so mild. including 1/3 in men and more than 1/2 in women.

# DATA, RESOURCES, HOTLINES, PUBLICATIONS and MEDIA CONTACTS

## **American Heart Association**

National Center  
7272 Greenville Avenue  
Dallas, TX 75231  
1-800-242-8721  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

## **NHLBI (National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute)**

Health Information Center  
P.O. Box 30105  
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105  
301 592 8573  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

## **American Diabetes Association**

1701 North Beauregard Street  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
1-800-342-2383  
[www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)

## **The American College of Cardiology Heart House**

9111 Old Georgetown Road  
Bethesda, MD 20814-1699  
1-800-253-4636  
[www.acc.org](http://www.acc.org)

## **National Institutes of Health**

9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892  
(P) 301-496-4000  
[www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)

## **The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201  
(P) 877-696-6775  
[www.os.dhhs.gov](http://www.os.dhhs.gov)

For a DVD copy of a 30 minute documentary style program on "Life After Heart Attack" call 1-888-380-6500 or visit.

[www.healthybodhealthy mind.com](http://www.healthybodhealthy mind.com)

To watch on television, consult your local public television station for air-times in your area.

