

THE NEED FOR CHANGE AFTER A HEART ATTACK

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KEY POINTS

- Even when your heart attack has been treated successfully, the conditions that caused it can still cause future problems.
- If you have had one heart attack, you are at a much higher risk of another.
- Continuing to take medication even when you feel well can reduce your chances of another heart attack. This is sometimes called secondary prevention.
- Lifestyle changes can speed up recovery and reduce your chance of another heart attack.
- It is normal to find it difficult to adapt to life after a heart attack. Support is available from friends, family, community groups, and health services.

Understanding your heart attack

The causes of heart attack

You have a heart attack when one or more of your coronary arteries becomes blocked. This is the result of a condition known as **Coronary Heart Disease (CHD)**. A fatty substance, known as **atheroma**, builds up on the lining of the blood vessel, narrowing the vessel and restricting blood flow, as shown in the picture below.



This process, called atherosclerosis, may continue until the blood vessel becomes completely blocked, or it may cause damage to the blood vessel and a blood clot may form. This clot may remain in place, or a piece can break off and travel in the blood, until it gets stuck in one of the smaller vessels

The treatment you received in hospital removed the immediate blockage causing your heart attack and restored blood flow to your heart. This treated the symptoms you had at the time and minimised the damage to the heart muscle, but does not address the underlying CHD. The medication you are prescribed following your heart attack, will help manage the condition and reduce your risk of another event.

The seriousness of a heart attack

It can be difficult to come to terms with how serious a heart attack is, particularly if your experience was reasonably mild and you recovered quickly. When you feel well, it can be difficult to remember what it was like to be ill. However, this is your chance to prevent another heart attack.

You can protect yourself and your loved ones by keeping your medication up to date, living a healthy lifestyle, and being aware of the risk of another heart attack.

Following a heart attack or any other health crisis, you can sometimes feel helpless or unable to control the situation.

It is true that there are things you cannot change, like genetics or certain stresses - but there are things that you can change, too. You have the power to reduce the risk of another heart attack, or of a stroke caused by the same kind of arterial blockage.

Common questions after heart attack

If I'm better, why do I need to take so many tablets?

The treatment you received in hospital treated your heart attack. However, the tablets you have been prescribed treat the causes of your heart attack. Without these tablets, your heart disease will get worse and you are at high risk of another heart attack.

I don't feel unwell, so why should I change anything?

Even though you feel ok just now, making healthy changes to your lifestyle helps to lower your risk of future heart problems. It will also help you to feel more in control of your health instead of waiting for something to go wrong again.

Where can I get support?

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland affiliated heart groups / clubs offer ongoing support for people living with heart conditions. They are independently run and provide a source of supported exercise, information, signposting, confidence and reassurance and are an invaluable part of learning to live with a heart condition. Call our Advice Line for more information or visit our website.

What should I expect?

After the shock of your heart attack and the initial recovery period it is normal to feel a wide range of emotions about what has happened. Some examples of how you might feel include:

- Sudden tiredness, feeling tense or scared, unusual bouts of bad temper, butterflies in your tummy, breathlessness and a pounding heart. These can all be symptoms of physical anxiety.
- You may feel very low or highly emotional.
- You may find it hard to be dependent on other people, even for a short time, especially if you have been previously fit and healthy.
- Worries about returning to work, finances and your future health can build up and add to stress and anxiety.
- You may feel frustrated by the recovery time, or feel that the advice you are given is not working. This can lead you to overdo things, or make it difficult to look after your health.

Lifestyle risk factors

When you are trying to reduce your risk of a future heart attack, it can help to ask yourself the following questions:



Do I smoke?

Smoking increases your risk of heart disease and multiplies other risk factors you may have. The most important thing you can do for your heart is to stop smoking. Help with quitting smoking is available through the Quit Your Way NHS service.



Do I have high blood pressure?

Uncontrolled high blood pressure increases your risk of heart disease. High blood pressure very rarely has any symptoms. The only way to know your blood pressure is to have it measured.



Do I have a high cholesterol level?

High cholesterol levels contributes to the fatty build up in the lining of your blood vessels which increases the risk of heart disease. If you are not sure what your cholesterol level is, ask your doctor to give you a cholesterol test.



Is my diet healthy and varied?

A "heart-healthy" diet - rich in high fibre, low in fat, with saturated fats replaced with unsaturated oils, and containing at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day - can help to reduce your risk of heart disease.



Do I eat too much salt?

Too much salt (sodium) in your diet can contribute to high blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. Reducing a high salt intake can sometimes help to lower your blood pressure.



Do I exercise enough?

Keeping active helps to lower high blood pressure and cholesterol levels. It is best to be physically active for at least 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week.



Am I a healthy weight?

Being overweight or obese can put extra strain on your heart, increase fatty build-up, and can lead to high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels. Being severely underweight can also increase your risk of heart attack. If you are concerned about your weight, speak to a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about ways you may be able to manage your weight.



Do I drink a lot of alcohol?

Drinking heavily increases your blood pressure and affects your cholesterol level. Try to drink no more than 14 units a week. If you are concerned about your alcohol intake, you can find more information and support at drinkaware.co.uk



Am I under a lot of stress?

Stress can become a trigger for unhelpful behaviours - such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, eating poorly and not getting enough physical activity - which can increase your risk of heart disease. If you are stressed, consider whether you can reduce your responsibilities, or whether something like mindfulness or meditation may help.



Do I take stimulant drugs?

In the first hour after stimulant use, you are nearly 24 times as likely to have a heart attack. Long-term use can cause heart failure, damage to your blood vessels, and high blood pressure. This includes: cocaine, MDMA, ecstasy, amphetamines, and khat.

Making changes after a heart attack

You may feel overwhelmed at the prospect of making changes to your lifestyle and taking control of your health. This is quite normal.

Forming a realistic plan, introducing changes gradually and involving family and friends are all ways to help make lasting changes that will benefit your overall health and reduce your risk of another heart attack.

Remember you do not have to go through this period on your own. Ask your GP about what support is available locally or phone the CHSS Advice Line practitioners for confidential advice, information, and to be directed to other support services from CHSS (Tel. no.: 0808 801 0899)

It is never too late to make a change.

Lifestyle changes and risk factors

There are certain things that increase your risk of developing heart disease. These are called risk factors. Risk factors do not cause a heart attack, but they can make one more likely.

Some risk factors are to do with things you cannot alter, e.g. family history, age and ethnic origin. However, many risk factors are to do with the way you lead your life and habits that you have created. These are called **lifestyle risk factors**.

Reducing your risk factors can help you to reduce your risk of another heart attack. To see where you can cut down your risk factors, check the list of lifestyle factors earlier in this factsheet.

Talk about it

If you keep these feelings, fears and worries to yourself then you may seem moody/irritable, or find yourself acting out of character. This can leave family members and close friends confused and they won't know how help you.

Learning to communicate with those close to you will help and is an important part of making a good recovery, reevaluating your lifestyle and moving on from what has happened.

Being able to talk about how you feel is healthy but not always easy. Some people find they just cannot talk to family members about how they really feel. Some find they can open up to a stranger, nurse, or therapist much more easily.

Ask your GP what support is offered in your area.

Many hospitals have a cardiac rehabilitation programme, run by cardiac rehabilitation nurses and physiotherapists, which will help you regain your fitness and confidence as well as providing you with information and advice.

Seek support in a way that suits you.

This could include heart groups, online forums or interactive apps for your phone. Remember that anyone can develop a mobile app so always read reviews before you download/buy.

Pace yourself.

Even though you may feel physically okay, your heart is going through a healing process. The factors which lead to your heart attack didn't happen overnight, so recovering from your heart attack will also take time. Introducing changes gradually can increase your chance of establishing a healthier lifestyle.

Medication

It is likely that you will have been prescribed several different types of medication for your heart. This can be quite a shock if you thought you were previously fit and well.

Though it may seem to you as if you had a heart attack 'out of the blue', it will usually be linked to health problems you already had - such as high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, or another heart problem. You may not have known about these problems, or had any symptoms, before your heart attack.

You will probably be prescribed some kind of medication to address these underlying problems. Taking your prescribed medications is vital to reduce your risk of another heart attack.

- Make sure you are clear on what all your medications are for, and what you should and should not do while taking them. Write this information down if you can. Remember that you can always ask your doctor to explain.
- Report any side effects or problems you have with the medication, but do not stop taking any drugs suddenly.
- Always get your doctor's advice before stopping a medication.
- Discuss all over the counter remedies with your pharmacist to make sure they won't interact with any prescribed drugs you are taking.

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