



## Nursing My Heart Back to Health: *My Top Priority*

### Tips for living well after a heart attack or an acute angina episode

You've just been hospitalized—maybe even had a medical procedure—for a heart attack or unstable angina. The message is clear: your heart needs you to take better care of it—and yourself.

It's only normal that you have questions and concerns. In this document, you'll find information that will help you maintain a healthy heart.

Go ahead and ask your loved ones to read it too. The more they know about what you're going through, the more they'll be able to help you nurse your heart back to health.

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# Understanding *angina and heart attacks*

The heart is a powerful muscle that delivers oxygen-rich blood to all parts of the body. To do its job properly, your heart needs to be nourished by oxygen-rich blood, which is supplied by the coronary arteries. **Angina and heart attack are two issues that arise when a coronary artery is blocked by a clot.**

## Angina

Angina is the pain you feel when your heart doesn't get as much oxygen as it needs because **one or more of the coronary arteries are partially blocked.**

To learn more about angina symptoms, refer to the back cover of this publication.

### Unstable angina

Angina can become unstable. The symptoms may occur with progressively less intense activity and even while at rest or sleeping. They can be relieved by nitroglycerin, though only temporarily. **If you have unstable angina, you are at greater risk of having a heart attack so be sure to seek medical attention quickly.**

## Heart attack

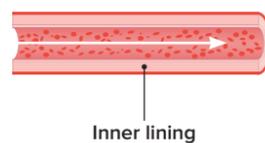
A heart attack, or myocardial infarction, occurs when a blood clot **suddenly blocks the blood flow completely.** If you don't get treated right away, part of your heart may be starved of oxygen and permanent damage may occur. Heart attacks can be lethal.

*In medical circles, the term **acute coronary syndrome** refers to **unstable angina or a heart attack.***

## How does an artery become blocked?

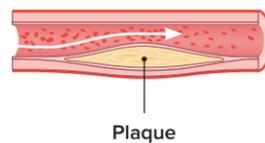
### Healthy artery

The inner linings are healthy and blood flows freely.



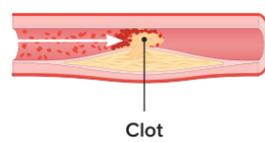
### Narrowed artery

Cholesterol, cells, and other substances can infiltrate the inner lining of the artery and form what is known as plaque. This phenomenon is called atherosclerosis.



### Blocked artery

The plaque ruptures and forms a blood clot, blocking the artery.



Different factors can cause the inner lining of the artery to become inflamed, increasing plaque build-up and eventually rupture.

## What are the risk factors?

Several risk factors can cause inflammation of the inner linings of the arteries or lead to acute coronary syndrome.

### RISK FACTORS YOU CAN'T CONTROL

- Age (risk increases with age)
- Family history of heart disease
- Gender (men under the age of 65 are at greater risk than women of the same age)

### RISK FACTORS YOU CAN CONTROL

- | Health issues                          | Lifestyle choices            |
|--|------------------------------|
| • High blood pressure                  | • Smoking                    |
| • Diabetes                             | • Physical inactivity        |
| • High levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol | • Unbalanced diet            |
| • Low levels of HDL (good) cholesterol | • Excessive levels of stress |
| • Being overweight                     |                              |

## Medical procedures

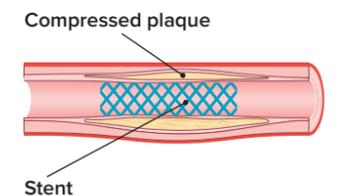
If you had angina or a heart attack, you may have needed a medical procedure to get the blood flowing again in the coronary artery blocked by plaque.

## Angioplasty

Angioplasty, also known as percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI), is performed to improve the blood flow in a coronary artery by opening it up. To do so, a balloon-tipped catheter (a thin tube) is inserted into the groin or wrist and threaded through the blood vessels up to the coronary artery that is blocked by plaque. The balloon is inflated, compressing the plaque and preventing it from blocking circulation. The balloon is then deflated and withdrawn.

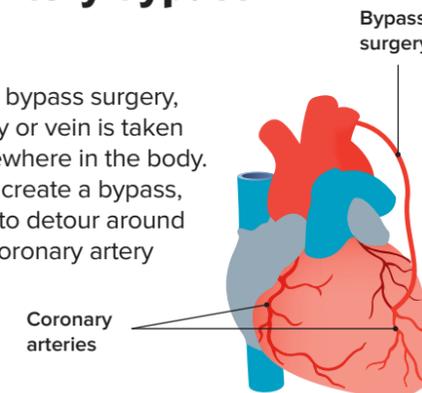
### Angioplasty with stent

Often a stent is put in place where the artery has been dilated by the balloon. A stent is a tiny metal mesh tube used to keep the artery open. Some stents (known as drug-eluting stents) are coated with medication.



## Coronary artery bypass surgery

For coronary artery bypass surgery, a piece of the artery or vein is taken from the leg or elsewhere in the body. It is then grafted to create a bypass, allowing the blood to detour around the portion of the coronary artery blocked by plaque.



## What to watch for after bypass surgery

See a doctor if you experience any of the following:

- Pain, redness, swelling, bleeding, or oozing at the incision site
- Fever or chills
- Trouble breathing
- Irregular pulse
- Swelling of the legs

Call **9-1-1** if you experience heavy bleeding, chest pain, fainting, or any other unusual symptoms.

# Returning home

Even if you've had a heart procedure or a heart attack, you can still lead a normal life. Once you get back home, **you can gradually resume your normal activities, as long as you listen to your body and the advice of your healthcare professionals.**

You'll probably have less energy than usual for the first few weeks. This is normal—you've just been through a great deal of stress, both physically and emotionally. Try not to wear yourself out and take lots of breaks. Learn to respect your limits.

## Resuming your everyday activities

Recovery does not mean bed rest. In fact, it's important that you get out of bed, get dressed, and do things. It will help you get better—and feel better.

In the first few days after returning home, you should be able to walk, go up a flight of stairs, and do light chores, like preparing meals.

### What to avoid after a medical procedure

**In the 3 days following an angioplasty,** avoid the following:

- Making any sudden movements with the arm or leg used for the procedure
- Lifting more than 5 kg (10 lb.)
- Engaging in vigorous physical activity
- Taking baths (take showers instead)

**In the 4 weeks following bypass surgery,** avoid the following:

- Putting pressure on your chest
- Contracting your abdomen (e.g., straining to have a bowel movement)
- Lifting more than 2.5 kg (5 lb.)

As you recover, you can start doing more.

If you had an **angioplasty with stent**, you can gradually return to your normal activities **after a week.**

If you had **bypass surgery**, expect to wait **6 to 12 weeks** before returning to your regular activities.

## Warning signs

If you experience any of these symptoms during an activity, it's a sign that you're overdoing it. Slow down or take a break.

- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Rapid heartbeat or irregular pulse
- Angina (chest pain)
- Nausea and vomiting

Wait up to 90 minutes after eating a meal before engaging in strenuous activities.

**IMPORTANT** Talk to a doctor if you experience these symptoms on a regular basis or while at rest. **If you are concerned about a relapse, see the information on the back cover of this publication.**



## Driving

Don't get behind the wheel right away. It's recommended that you wait between 2 and 7 days after an angioplasty, and between 1 and 3 months after a heart attack or bypass surgery. Before giving you the green light, your doctor will look at your medical condition, the medication you're taking, and what class of licence you have.

## Social life, recreation, and travelling

Going out and seeing friends can help keep your spirits up. It's good to be social, but don't overdo it. Set limits when you need to—your loved ones will understand.

It's OK to take **road trips** when you're in the passenger seat, but try to keep them to a minimum for the first few weeks so you don't wear yourself out.

Before booking a **flight**, ask your doctor about the risks and what precautions you should take. Ask your insurance company if there are any restrictions.

*After my bypass surgery, I got help from my local health unit until I regained my strength. It was the best way for me to become autonomous again.*

**Doris, age 72**

## What about work?

Some people can't wait to get back to work. Others dread the thought. While others decide it's time to make a change.

Everyone is different but, generally speaking, you can go back to work after the following time periods:

- 1 to 2 weeks after an angioplasty for unstable angina
- 4 to 12 weeks after an angioplasty for a heart attack
- 6 to 12 weeks after bypass surgery

The date and terms of your return to work will be determined with your doctor. How soon you go back will depend mostly on the **state of your health** and the **type of work you do**. You may want to ask your employer if you can return to work gradually.

## Sexual activity

It's normal to feel anxious about resuming sexual activity. Remember that sexual relations are no more demanding on the heart than climbing two flights of stairs or going for a brisk walk. As with all other activities, the most important thing is that you listen to your body. If you had bypass surgery, avoid putting pressure on your chest.

Fatigue, emotional shock, and some types of medication may reduce your sex drive and make it more difficult for a man to have an erection. Talk to a doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about any concerns you may have. They can help you find solutions. Never take any medication that treats erectile dysfunction without discussing it with one of these professionals.



Despite my cardiologist telling me I was OK, whenever I felt the slightest hint of pain, I was sure I was having another heart attack. A psychologist helped me break the spiral of anxiety.

Robert, age 48

## What about your mental health?

Learning that you have heart disease can certainly be stressful and upsetting. You may experience a range of reactions, all of which are normal.

- **Emotional shock** (imagining the worst, such as permanent disability or death, without knowing all the details)
- **Anger** (wondering “Why is this happening to me?” or feeling indignant at being diminished)
- **Denial** (acting as though nothing happened or playing down how serious it is)
- **Fear** (of a relapse or of not being able to go back to a fulfilling life)

Don't be embarrassed; **talk about your feelings**. Give yourself time to adjust to your new reality. By learning more about the disease and taking an active role in your treatment, you can regain more control over your life and feel less threatened by the situation.

Don't hesitate to ask for help when things get tough. Healthcare professionals (doctor, nurse, psychologist, pharmacist, dietitian, kinesiologist, etc.) and support groups are there to help you.

### Depression and anxiety disorders

If you feel sad, discouraged, angry, or anxious for more than 4 to 6 weeks, you may be suffering from depression or an anxiety disorder. These conditions require specific treatment. It is therefore important that you seek help from a healthcare professional.

## Your loved ones are also affected

What you have just been through will probably affect your family and friends as well. It is normal for them to be upset that you are ill and to worry about your health and future. They too must adapt to the changes caused by your illness—changes that affect you directly or that affect your family routine.

### They can help you

Just like you, your loved ones want you to recover fully. Let them take care of you and assist with your treatment. Feel free to tell them what you need the most.

If you feel overprotected or, conversely, that too much is being asked of you, speak up. Communication is key! And a heartfelt thanks always goes a long way.

*Depression occurs in 1 in every 3 people who've had a heart attack. If left untreated, depression doubles your risk of having another cardiac event.*

# A healthy lifestyle

## The key to recovery

Adopting a healthy lifestyle is key to preventing and treating acute coronary syndrome and many other health issues. Combined with taking the medication prescribed to you, **adopting a healthy lifestyle will reduce your risk of having further heart problems**. Better yet, you'll have more energy, feel better, and be healthier in general.

## Living smoke-free

If you're a smoker, quitting is without a doubt the best thing you can do for your health. **The list of pros is long**, starting with lowering your risk of having heart problems in the future. People who smoke are two to three times more likely to have heart disease than those who don't smoke.

Quitting smoking may not be easy, but **with good planning and support, you can do it!** Enlisting the help of a smoking cessation counsellor will increase your chances of succeeding. By calling the 1 866 366-3667 help line, you can speak with a counsellor and find out where you can get help nearby.

Ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist about pharmacological aids that could work for you. If you've already tried to quit, **use your experience** to stack the odds in your favour. And don't forget to reach out to your loved ones for help.

### Secondary smoke

Secondary smoke is also dangerous to your health, so ask those around you to refrain from smoking in your house or car.

## Being active every day

There are lots of reasons to make physical activity part of your life. It helps make your heart stronger. It also helps manage blood pressure, improve blood cholesterol levels, control blood sugar levels, and promote a healthy weight, not to mention managing stress and improving your mood.

It's safe to exercise as long as you respect your limits and any restrictions related to the procedure you had (see page 4). If you feel tired or experience other symptoms, stop and rest.

**Walking is the best form of exercise** if you recently had a heart problem. Walk outside whenever you can, unless it's really cold or windy, or there's heavy smog.



### Get walking!

- Aim to go for a walk **every day**.
- Start with slow walks of no more than 5 to 10 minutes, and then gradually walk for **longer periods**.
- Once you've reached 15 minutes, increase your **speed** if you feel ready.
- Once you've reached at least 30 minutes of moderate activity every day, be sure to **keep it up!**



## Eating well

Just like exercise, healthy eating affects your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, weight, and other factors that contribute to the health of your heart.

### ✓ What your heart likes

- Lots of vegetables and fruit—but not too much fruit juice
- Grains (bread, pasta, rice, oats, etc.)—preferably whole grains
- Fish, poultry (without the skin), legumes, tofu, lean meat
- Low-fat dairy products (milk and yogurt with less than 2% fat, light or part skim cheese) and their alternatives (e.g., fortified soy beverages)
- Meals prepared at home using healthy ingredients

Every day, aim to eat a small amount of good fat, which can be found in **oils** (olive, canola), **fatty fish** (salmon, trout, herring, sardines, mackerel), **nuts and seeds** (almonds, walnuts, ground flax or Chia seeds, pumpkin seeds, natural peanut butter), **non-hydrogenated margarine**, and **avocados**.



### ✗ What your heart doesn't like

- Excessive salt (sodium) hidden in commercial foods, such as cold cuts, soups and sauces, potato chips, fast food, many ready-made dishes, etc. And go easy on the salt shaker!
- Trans and saturated fats found in pastries, fried food, donuts, crackers, etc.
- Added sugar found in soft drinks, cookies, chocolate, candies, jams, etc.
- Extra calories that come from snacking between meals or hefty servings like you sometimes get when you eat out.

### Drink in moderation!

Ask your doctor if it's safe to drink alcohol with your condition or while taking your prescribed medication. Find out what is considered an appropriate amount and remember not to drink every day.

## Managing your weight

Excess fat—especially when it's around your waist—is dangerous to the health of your heart.

A number of factors can affect your weight, including what you eat, a lack of exercise, high levels of stress, the people around you (family, friends, work, and neighbourhood), etc. If you need to lose weight, understanding what has caused you to be overweight in the first place will help you find the right strategies.

Fad diets and food restrictions (e.g., skipping meals, eliminating food groups) are not good long-term solutions. In fact, they can be harmful both physically and psychologically. If you want to lose weight, you're better off eating healthy foods when you feel hungry, eating reasonable portions, and avoiding snacks. Of course, getting some form of exercise every single day helps too!

## Dealing with stress

It is increasingly recognized that, in the long run, too much stress can contribute to heart disease. It can also lead to habits that are harmful to your health, such as alcohol abuse or poor eating habits.

If you feel stressed and you notice that your body is sending you warning signs (sleep or digestive problems, headaches, mood swings, etc.), try to identify what is causing the stress. Looking at things from a different angle, letting go of what isn't important or what can't be changed, and asking for help are all approaches that could help you deal with stress.

## Developing healthy habits

Having been hospitalized may make you question some of your lifestyle choices and change your priorities. You may want to kick some of your old habits and develop new ones that will help you recover more quickly and reduce your risk of a relapse—an opportunity you won't want to miss!

### 8 strategies to help you succeed

- 1 | Change because you want to, not because you have to.** Others may give you information and advice, but you have to decide to change for yourself. Do it for your *own* reasons and values.
- 2 | Take baby steps.** Start with something easy and realistic. Pick something you know will be good for you and are confident you can do.
- 3 | Find ways to make it fun.** Look at change as something positive, not negative.
- 4 | Try to anticipate the challenges** you may encounter and think of ways to overcome them. Remember that slips are not the end of the world. Try to use them as opportunities to do better next time.



- 5 | Ask your loved ones for support** without demanding that they change too.
- 6 | Look how far you've come.** Pat yourself on the back for your hard work and celebrate your achievements both big and small.
- 7 | Treat yourself as you would treat a friend!** Be kind to yourself and stay positive.
- 8 | Be patient.** Changing habits doesn't happen overnight—it can take weeks.

Talk to your healthcare team or consult the Canadian Association of Cardiovascular Prevention and Rehabilitation website to see if there are any **cardiac rehabilitation programs** in your area. These programs are a great way to get advice from a variety of specialists on how to improve your health and wellness—plus, you'll get the opportunity to meet people going through the same thing as you.

# Medication

## The key to recovery

When you're discharged from the hospital, your doctor will probably prescribe a number of medications. Each one plays an important role, so make sure you understand when and how to take them. **Never change the dosage or stop taking any of your medication without talking to your doctor or pharmacist first.** If you have concerns or are experiencing side effects, these professionals can help you find the right solutions.



### Antiplatelets

#### ROLE

- To prevent blood clots from forming.
- You will likely be prescribed a small dose of aspirin to take for the rest of your life.
- If you have been treated with a stent, you will likely be given a prescription for a second antiplatelet (Brilinta, Effient, or Plavix) to prevent blood from clotting inside the stent. This prescription is usually for a few months up to a year.

#### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

- Bruises, nose bleeds
- Allergic reaction (e.g., itchiness)
- Shortness of breath

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Never skip a dose of Brilinta, Effient, or Plavix and be sure to take your medication at regular times.
- Postpone all non-urgent medical procedures (e.g., routine colonoscopy) if you are taking Brilinta, Effient, or Plavix.
- Before having dental work, tell your dentist that you are taking antiplatelets.
- Avoid contact sports and take extra care to prevent cuts and injuries.
- To prevent nose bleeds, keep the humidity in your house at roughly 40%. Use a nasal lubricant when needed. If you have a nose bleed, tilt your head forward slightly and pinch the soft part of your nose for approximately 15 minutes. You can also apply ice. If the bleeding is frequent or severe, contact a doctor.

**If you have trouble breathing or experience other major symptoms, call 9-1-1.**

### Nitrates (nitroglycerin, TNT)

#### ROLE

- To provide quick relief from angina symptoms.

#### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

- Headaches, dizziness, low blood pressure (hypotension), irregular heartbeat, and fainting

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Do not take medication that treats erectile dysfunction (e.g., Viagra, Cialis, Levitra) when you are prescribed nitrates. Combining these medications can be dangerous. Consult a healthcare professional to discuss other options.
- Always keep a nitro pump within reach and check it often to make sure the pump is working properly, is not expired, etc.

**Refer to the back cover to learn how to recognize the symptoms of angina and how to take nitroglycerin.**

### Statins

#### ROLE

- To lower cholesterol levels to prevent plaque from accumulating in your arteries.

#### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

- Muscle or joint pain
- Heartburn
- Diarrhea

*Check that none of your medications interact with grapefruit. If so, avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice.*

### Beta-blockers

#### ROLE

- To reduce the workload on your heart by slowing your heartbeat and your blood pressure.

#### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

- Dyspnea (shortness of breath) and decreased physical endurance (the first month)
- Fatigue, drowsiness
- Cold hands and feet (if your feet are pale or white, talk to a doctor)
- Weakness or dizziness
- Dry mouth, eyes, and skin
- Erectile problems
- Nightmares
- Overly slow heart rate

#### RECOMMENDATION

- If the side effects are still present after a few weeks, talk to a doctor or pharmacist.

### Helpful tips

Always talk to a healthcare professional **before taking any non-prescription medication or natural health products** (e.g., vitamins, supplements). Some products may have dangerous interactions with your medication or be contraindicated for your condition.

If possible, **always buy your medication at the same pharmacy.** That way, the pharmacy professionals have access to your complete file and can better advise you.

### Antihypertensives

#### ROLE

- To lower your blood pressure.

#### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

- Extreme drop in blood pressure: frequent dizziness, fatigue, light-headedness, systole (first number) lower than 100 mm Hg (e.g., 95/50 mm Hg)

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ask someone on your healthcare team how often you should take your blood pressure and what values are considered normal for you. Note your results and share them with your doctor during your appointments.
- If you frequently experience low blood pressure symptoms (dizziness, fatigue, light-headedness), check your blood pressure. If it is not in the target range, talk to a doctor, pharmacist, or nurse.

Keep an **up-to-date list of your medication** in your wallet or purse.

Consider wearing a **medical identification bracelet** that indicates that you have angina or that you are taking antiplatelets. This information is always helpful in case of an emergency.



## Can heart problems recur?

**Prescribed medication** and a **healthy lifestyle** can lower your risk of future episodes of angina or heart attack. **The more serious you are about your treatment, the greater your chances of avoiding heart problems in the future.** Of course, there are no guarantees, so it's important that you learn to recognize the warning signs.

### Symptoms of a heart attack



**Chest discomfort** (uncomfortable chest pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain, burning or heaviness)\*



**Discomfort in other areas of the upper body** (neck, jaw, shoulder, arms, back)\*

#### Other possible symptoms:

Shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, light-headedness

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### Main symptoms of angina

Pain in your chest that may spread to your shoulder, arm, back, neck or jaw.

Symptoms of angina are often experienced during or after exertion or emotional stress and are relieved with rest or nitroglycerin.

**Important:** If these symptoms worsen (duration, intensity, frequency) or if you experience these symptoms while at rest, get medical attention as soon as possible.

### Helpful resources

**Your healthcare team:** find out how they can be reached in the event of a problem.

**8-1-1 (or your provincial health information phone line):** to talk to a nurse about non-urgent health issues. The service is free, confidential, and available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

 **HEART &  
STROKE  
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[www.heartandstroke.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.ca)

The content of this publication is for information purposes only and should not replace the advice of a healthcare professional.

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### If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, you should:

- **Stop all activity.**
- **If you don't have nitroglycerin, call 9-1-1 immediately**, or have someone call for you.
- **If you have nitroglycerin**, take it as follows or as directed:
  - ✓ Do not shake the bottle. Spray twice into the air.
  - ✓ Spray once onto or under your tongue. Do not inhale the spray.
  - ✓ Wait 5 minutes. If the pain continues, spray a second time.
  - ✓ Wait 5 minutes. If the pain continues, spray a third time.
  - ✓ Wait 5 minutes. If the pain is still not relieved, **call 9-1-1 right away**.
- **If the 9-1-1 operator advises it**, chew and swallow one adult tablet or two 80 mg tablets of ASA (Aspirin), as long as you are not allergic or intolerant.
- **Rest and wait for emergency medical personnel to arrive.** Do not try to get to the hospital on your own.