



**Waitemata**  
District Health Board

Best Care for Everyone

# Cardiac Rehabilitation Exercise Advice

## Why should I exercise?

If you have a heart condition, regular exercise and physical activity is an essential part of your recovery and ongoing wellbeing

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*What you need to know*

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## ***Why should I exercise?***

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Being active is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your risk of having a heart attack or further heart problems.

Being active and exercising not only makes you feel good but also keeps your heart healthy by helping to:

- ♥ improve your total blood cholesterol levels
- ♥ lower your blood pressure
- ♥ control your blood sugar levels
- ♥ reduce your risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- ♥ reduce your weight/ maintain a healthy weight
- ♥ reduce stress and/ or feelings of depression
- ♥ improve your quality of sleep
- ♥ strengthen bones.

Exercise also creates a better sense of general wellbeing by improving balance, flexibility and muscle tone. This assists to maintain your independence and quality of life.

## ***What type of exercise is appropriate?***

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The best type of activity for people with a heart condition is aerobic (endurance) exercise. This is any activity that uses the large arm and leg muscle groups eg walking, cycling, swimming and dancing.

Strength or resistance training may also be incorporated into your exercise programme to strengthen weak muscles or to add variety to your programme.

## ***How much exercise should I do?***

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When you first go home from hospital, start by walking on flat ground, as you did on the ward. Aim to do 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on most, if not all days of the week, to improve your health.

In the early stages of your recovery, or if you are not used to exercising, you may find it easier to manage 2 or 3 shorter walks (10-15 minutes) to reach the 30 minute goal per day.

## ***How hard should I exercise?***

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- Moderate intensity exercise is recommended.
- This means when you exercise you should be getting warm, and breathing more deeply. It is a normal response to be more breathless when you exercise. You should still be able to talk when exercising.
- You should not be puffing, panting and unable to talk in a sentence whilst exercising. This is a sign that you are pushing yourself too hard. Stop or slow down, give yourself time to recover, then continue with the exercise at a lighter level.
- You should always have some reserve left when exercising.
- It is recommended you talk with your doctor before performing vigorous activity.

## ***Exercise effort scale***

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- The following scale may be used to indicate how hard you feel the exercise or activity is. Consider the total feeling of effort – physical effort, fatigue and breathing. Try not to under or over estimate.
- Aim for light – moderate intensity in the early stages of recovery, then moderate – somewhat hard when your fitness improves.

	<b>Total feeling of effort</b>	<b>Whilst exercising you are able to</b>
<b>0</b>	Nothing at all	
<b>1</b>	Very light (easy)	<i>Sing</i>
<b>2</b>	Light	<b>Talk</b> <b><i>YOUR EXERCISE TRAINING ZONE</i></b>
<b>3</b>	Moderate	
<b>4</b>	Somewhat hard	
<b>5</b>	Hard	
<b>6</b>		
<b>7</b>	Very hard	<i>Gasp</i>
<b>8</b>		
<b>9</b>	Very, very hard	
<b>10</b>	Maximal	

## ***Walking***

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- Research has shown that this is one of the best forms of exercise for people with heart disease.

- You should try to walk on most days of the week. It is okay to have rest days.
- You can walk indoors (eg shopping malls), or outdoors.
- To improve your fitness, start walking in an area that is flat initially
- Gradually increase your walking distance, adding in slopes/ hills when you are able to.
- Using an exercycle or aqua (water based) exercise can add variety to your programme, and is a good alternative for people who have difficulty walking or in wet weather.

### ***Warm up***

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Warming up is very important to your exercise sessions as it helps to prepare the muscles and heart for exercise. Start you exercise at a slower pace for about 5 minutes.

### ***Cool down***

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Take time to slow down your exercise towards the end of the exercise sessions to allow your body to return gradually to a resting state. Make sure you do not stop suddenly.

### ***Getting active the safe way***

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- Talk to your physiotherapist, cardiac nurse, or doctor first if you have not attended the cardiac rehabilitation programme. They can advise you on the safest way to increase your level of activity.
- **Start slowly and build up your activity level – both in time and intensity.**
- Avoid the over-activity rest trap, which is “work until you are exhausted then rest until you feel better”. Set yourself realistic goals. If you are unsure about how to set realistic goals, please talk to your cardiac rehabilitation team.
- Maintain fluid/water intake in hot weather and take weather conditions into account when exercising outdoors.
- Wear supportive footwear, and comfortable clothing.
- If you are diabetic make sure you have a snack available.
- Always carry your angina spray or other necessary medication with you if appropriate.

- Take a cell phone with you, if you have one.
- Don't exercise straight after a heavy meal.
- Avoid heavy lifting and straining in the early stages of recovery.

### ***When you should not exercise or stop exercising***

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Listen to your body. Do not exercise if you feel unwell. For example:

- Unstable angina, chest pain or discomfort
- Colds, flu or infection
- Dizziness, feeling faint or sick
- Increasing pain or flare up of pain
- Unstable blood sugar levels for diabetics
- Increased shortness of breath and increasing swollen ankles
- Unusual palpitations, such as racing or irregular heartbeat.

**Stop exercising if the symptoms don't go away or come back later, and see your doctor.**

### ***Activity guidelines following open heart surgery***

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- **For patients following open heart surgery – remember to follow the guidelines given to you about limitation of activity and healing of the breastbone.**
- As a guide, it takes six weeks for the breastbone to knit together, twelve weeks before the breastbone is completely healed – avoid lifting weights greater than ½ kg during this time.
- Avoid activities which cause discomfort in the breastbone.
- It is important to maintain good posture after your surgery. Remember to keep your shoulders relaxed and free of tension.
- **It is important to report any clicking, increased pain or any oozing from your breastbone wound to your doctor or cardiac rehabilitation team.**

### ***Activity guidelines following pacemaker or implantable cardiac defibrillator (ICD) insertion***

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**Follow the guidelines given to you after insertion of your device.** Heavy lifting and activities that require you to lift your arm above shoulder height should be avoided for four weeks until the lead wires become fully secure.

## ***Tips for staying active***

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- **Being active is for life**, so make sure you are doing something you enjoy.
- **Set yourself small achievable goals.** Include what you will do and when. Write these in a diary or on a calendar. Tick them off when completed, and reward yourself when you have made progress.
- **Incorporate physical activity as part of your daily routine.** For example, take the stairs instead of the lift or walk to the shops rather than drive.
- **Get your friends and family involved.** This way you can motivate and encourage each other to get fit and have fun at the same time.
- **Listen to music while you exercise.**
- **Join an exercise or walking group.**
- Ask your cardiac rehabilitation team, doctor or practice nurse for a **Green Prescription**, or phone 0800 22 84 83. A patient support person will give you details of exercise options in your area and ongoing support to reach your goals.

## ***Returning to sexual activity***

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- Return to sex is part of returning to normal life. Sex takes the same amount of energy as walking up two flights of stairs. If that's something you can physically do comfortably, then as long as both partners are emotionally ready, it is okay to have sex.
- **Post open heart surgery:** To prevent injury or wound pain/discomfort, consideration should be given to position while your breastbone is healing.

## ***Home exercise programme ideas***

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The following exercises are examples of the type of exercise that you can continue with at home. These exercises may be carried out if you are unable to exercise outdoors or **in addition** to a walking or aerobic programme.

Remember to follow the **tips for getting active the safe way**, and start off slowly, gradually building up the repetitions when you are able to.



- Reach both arms up together.



- Stand leaning with your back against a wall
- Slowly slide down the wall, as far as comfortable
- Push up from legs to return to starting position



- Bend elbow up to shoulder, slowly lower
- Alternate arms



- Step ups or stairs



- Marching on the spot



- Stand up and then sit down on a chair

### ***Exercise progression***

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When you are able to carry out these exercises comfortably, you can make them more difficult by:

1. Increasing the number of repetitions.
2. Adding a weight to the exercises. Remember to do the exercises without arm weights or ½ kg only for the first six weeks following open heart surgery. Remember to avoid lifting your arm above shoulder height for four weeks following pacemaker or implantable cardiac defibrillator (ICD) insertion.
3. Having fewer or shorter rest periods between the exercises.

**If you have any further questions please contact the  
Outpatient Physiotherapy Department**

**North Shore Hospital (09) 487-1266**

**Waitakere Hospital (09) 839 0589**

**Or talk to your Cardiology Nurse Specialist, Doctor or Practice Nurse**