

Life After A Heart Attack

A heart attack changes the lives of both seniors and their caregivers. If your loved one has had a heart attack, it's essential to understand the medications and lifestyle changes necessary for a successful recovery. According to the American Heart Association, over 1 million people in the U.S. have heart attacks each year, and about half of them survive. Fortunately, because of advances in coronary surgery and patient care, seniors who survive a heart attack can enjoy a healthy, active life for years to come.

Depending on the severity of the heart attack and the damage to the heart, recovery and return to everyday activities may be relatively quick. Some patients are able to go back to everyday activities one to three weeks following the heart attack. Others need more time to recover, either in a hospital setting or at home with family and nursing care. Seniors over the age of 65 may need eight weeks or more to fully recover from a heart attack, as they are more prone to complications and often less active than younger patients.

As a caregiver, your role can be challenging. You may feel angry, resentful and overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. What can you expect when your loved one returns home after a heart attack? How can you cope when recovery is difficult? Here are some tips to help you after your loved one has suffered a heart attack:

Medication

“After a heart attack, medication is probably the most important thing,” says Dr. Gerald Fletcher, a Preventative Cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic in Florida. However, because of the cost of prescription drugs or a failure to take medication regularly, many seniors don't get the proper dosages – with serious consequences. “Frequently, people who don't understand the importance of medications are back in the hospital for heart failure,” says Dr. Fletcher.

Medications for heart attack patients include statins, ACE inhibitors, beta blockers and aspirin. The amount of medication needed by a patient varies, and as a caregiver you should educate yourself about these drugs, their side effects and interactions, and the proper dosages.

Medications are not the only help your loved one will need for optimal health after a heart attack. “Many older individuals are overweight, or smoke, or don't exercise,” says Dr. Fletcher. “So lifestyle changes are also needed to avoid further hospitalization.”

Exercise

Exercise can help strengthen the heart muscle, provide more energy and improve emotional health. Your loved ones' physician may do what is called a stress test to determine a healthy and safe level of exercise, and you should never implement an exercise program without consulting a physician.

“A properly prescribed exercise plan is necessary,” says Dr. Fletcher. “Some older people don't exercise, and after a heart attack they really need to make more time for physical activity.” Dr. Fletcher adds that many seniors avoid exercise due to factors such as joint pain, or don't “exercise properly” to get the full benefits. Although seniors need to find an exercise program that is safe for their level of activity, most doctors will recommend that your loved one gets more physical activity than he or she did before the heart attack.

Diet

Your loved one will probably have to make changes to his or her diet. A healthy diet is one of the best ways to lower the risk of another heart attack. A diet low in saturated fat and salt should be followed, incorporating a variety of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, fish and low fat dairy products into everyday meals.

Emotional Changes

When your loved one returns home after a heart attack, you must be prepared for some changes - not just physical, but emotional. It is normal for heart attack survivors to feel extremely fearful of another heart attack, or upset and resentful at having to rely on others for primary care. Spending time in the hospital in an unfamiliar environment is stressful for anyone, and the anxiety around suffering a second heart attack can plague even the most positive senior. "Some get very depressed," says Dr. Fletcher.

A previously compliant loved one may refuse to eat healthy foods at mealtimes, or snap out of irritation at advice you give about his or her health. Your loved one may seem subdued, or be frightened in situations where he or she has to do things without your help. This is normal and may last for up to six months after the heart attack. However, the American Heart Association recommends that you seek professional help for your loved one if he or she is exhibiting signs of severe depression, talk of suicide or there is continued interference with daily activities.

Chest Pain (Angina Pectoris)

Any chest pain that your loved one experiences should be reported to a doctor as soon as possible. However, slight pressure in the chest that goes away soon after is usually normal in patients who have previously had a heart attack, so keep calm if he or she is feeling this slight pain or pressure. There is medication that can ease these symptoms and make your loved one more comfortable.

Cardiac Rehabilitation

A cardiac rehabilitation program can help your loved one learn more about his or her condition, utilize proper exercise routines and make necessary dietary changes, and it can be especially beneficial for those who need to make lifestyle changes such as eliminating alcohol or tobacco, losing weight or managing other conditions such as diabetes.

Cardiac rehabilitation is different from regular heart attack aftercare, and according to the American Heart Association, the program has been effective in

decreasing mortality rates, additional heart attacks and further surgeries in patients. During cardiac rehabilitation, patients work with a team of health professionals such as doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and nutritionists to develop individual recovery goals. These health professionals will also closely monitor aerobic and resistance exercises to determine a healthy level of long-term activity.

Your loved one will need plenty of support during recovery from a heart attack, but so will you! Don't be afraid to reach out to friends, family or a professional if you are feeling frightened, resentful or worried. If you start to feel overwhelmed by the situation:

Seek support: Reach out to a family member or friend if you are finding it difficult to deal with the situation. Counselling or a support group can be extremely beneficial.

Take a break: Recharge as often as you can. Don't try to do everything – even if that means asking for help! Your loved ones' health is your number one concern, but you have to be healthy to provide adequate support, so devote time to yourself and your needs.

Keep a positive attitude. Although your role as a caregiver can be exhausting, one of the best things you can do for yourself and your loved one is to stay positive when times get tough.

As a caregiver, you play an integral role. Some of the lifestyle changes your loved one needs to make may be hard: losing weight, changing an unhealthy diet, increasing exercise or quitting alcohol or tobacco use. Your loved one will also need your emotional support and continued understanding to stay healthy and positive.

It is possible for seniors to live for “many, many years,” after a heart attack, says Dr. Fletcher, who adds that seniors who follow their physician's recommendations can continue to have a “very productive life.” Dr. Fletcher

advises that heart attack patients and their caregivers utilize the guidelines given by the American Heart Association.

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