



# Heart Failure: Activity and Exercise

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## Overview

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Regular activity has many benefits for people who have heart failure. It may help you to:

- Have fewer symptoms. For example, you may feel less tired or less out of breath.
- Feel stronger and have more energy.
- Improve your mood.
- Stay independent and live longer.
- Avoid having to go to the hospital.

If you aren't already active, talk with your doctor before you start an exercise program. Of course, what's safe for you depends on how bad your heart failure is. But even if you can do only a small amount of exercise, it's better than not doing any exercise at all.

## How can you safely start an exercise program?

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### Making a plan for safe activity

If you have heart failure, it's important to be careful when you are active. If you exercise too much or too hard, you may put too much stress on your heart. And that can make your heart failure worse.

Work with your doctor to build a plan before you start exercising. Together you can create a plan that will keep you active, healthy, and safe.

- Get tests, if you need them, before getting active.  
Your doctor may do tests to find out how much activity your heart can safely handle. These tests may include an electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) and possibly an exercise stress test. Then your doctor can suggest a safe level of exercise based on your condition and the stage of your disease.
- Ask your doctor if a cardiac rehab program is right for you.  
Cardiac rehab can help you get and stay active. Your rehab team will design an exercise program just for you. It will be based on your health and goals.
- Choose activities that you enjoy or want to try.  
Your doctor can help you choose activities that will help your heart and are safe for you. An exercise program usually consists of stretching, activities that increase your heart rate (aerobic exercise), and strength training (lifting light weights).

- Plan your level of activity.  
With your doctor, plan how often, how long, and how hard you will be active. Don't exercise too hard, because it can put stress on your heart. And it may make your symptoms worse.
- Pay attention to how you are feeling.  
You should be able to talk easily without being out of breath. If you notice that you're out of breath, have chest pain, or don't feel right, stop exercising. Take a rest. Know when to call for help.
- Check your heart rate (pulse).  
Learn how to check your pulse or use a heart rate monitor. Your doctor may give you a range of how fast your heart rate should be when you exercise.
- Exercise only when your symptoms are under control.  
Talk with your doctor about how to know when it's not safe for you to exercise. Cut back on your exercise if you're tired or not feeling well.

## Tracking your activity

Tracking your activity can help you see what you're doing well and where you could improve. Seeing your progress can inspire you to keep doing the things that are working well.

Many people use a fitness app to track their activity. Many of the apps are free.

If you prefer, you can write down your activity in a notebook. Bring your tracker to doctor visits to talk about your progress and how you're feeling.

Some ideas for things you can track include:

- Your daily activity.
- How long you did the activity.
- Your short-term exercise goals.
- Benefits you may feel from being active, like feeling less out of breath or having more energy.
- How you feel. It's okay to cut back on your activity if you're too tired or not feeling well.
- Barriers or challenges you've faced—and dealt with.
- Other thoughts or feelings about being active.

## Staying with your plan

Here are some ideas to help you stay with your exercise plan.

- Make exercise fun.  
Do activities you enjoy. Try exercising with a friend. It can be much easier to keep doing an exercise program if you exercise with someone else.
- Set goals you can meet.  
If you expect too much, you're likely to get discouraged and stop exercising.
- Give yourself time.  
It can take months to get into the habit of exercising. After a few months, you may find that you look forward to it.
- Reward yourself.  
Build in rewards along the way that help you continue your program.

## Getting support

It's common to want to do things on our own, without help. But if you have heart failure and you want to be more active, support from others can make a big difference.

Many people find that involving others really helps when trying to reach goals.

So ask yourself: who could help you be more active? And how could they help?

Support can come in different ways. It might come from your care team, cardiac rehab, or a support group. Or it could come from family, friends, neighbors, or pets.

Here are some ideas for getting support. It may help to write down your thoughts.

- Make a list of who could help you.  
Take a minute to think about two or three people who could help you be more active. If it helps, you can write down their names.
- Learn from support you've had in the past.  
When people have helped you before with other challenges, what kind of help was the most useful? Could you get the same kind of help now?
- Ask for words of encouragement.  
If you like verbal encouragement, what would you like to hear and from whom?
- Get help with the logistics.  
This could include things like help with cost, transportation, or planning for your daily activities. What would help most?
- Find a partner.  
What activities, if any, would you be more likely to try with a friend or family member?
- Choose a time to take the first step.  
When is a good time to reach out to someone to help you be more active?

## Related Information

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- Cardiac Rehabilitation

## Credits

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