

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR CHANGES AFTER A HEART ATTACK

Sometimes the suddenness of a heart attack and the rapid emergency treatment can leave you with little understanding about your condition. You may feel that you haven't even been ill or that what has happened isn't that serious. Advances in medicine mean that nowadays, lots of people not only survive a heart attack but recover quickly. However, the underlying problems are still there.

If you don't take your medications and make any necessary changes to your lifestyle you are increasing your risk of having another heart attack.

Even though your initial recovery may be going well it is important to understand the seriousness of what has happened to you. Facing the facts can be hard, especially if you are feeling well. However, this is your chance to try to prevent another heart attack and take control of your health.

This factsheet aims to help you understand the reality of your situation. It also aims to help you understand why you need to take medication for your heart and make healthy changes to your lifestyle.

See the CHSS booklet 'Heart attack: a guide to your recovery' for more information about heart attacks, tests, treatments, lifestyle changes and the recovery process.

Common questions

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 underlying cause of your heart attack: coronary heart disease. Without these tablets your heart disease may get worse and you may have another heart attack.

I don't feel unwell so why do I need to change anything?

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

I don't think I can do this on my own, where can I get support?

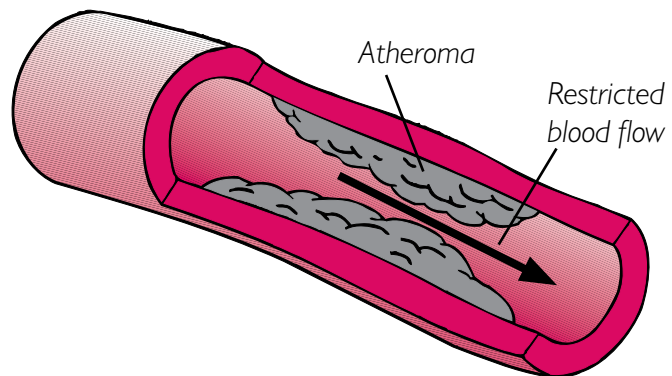
Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland affiliated heart groups / clubs offer ongoing support for people living with heart conditions. They are independently run and provide a source of supported exercise, information, signposting, confidence and reassurance and are an invaluable part of learning to live with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

FACTSHEET

Accepting the facts

- The reason you had a heart attack was because the blood supply to part of your heart became blocked. This usually happens as a result of underlying coronary heart disease.
- In coronary heart disease a fatty substance, called atheroma, builds up in the lining of one (or more) of your coronary arteries. This narrows the artery and causes a restricted blood flow. This process, known as atherosclerosis, can lead to angina and heart attacks.

The treatment you received in hospital removed the immediate blockage causing your heart attack and restored blood flow to your heart. However, this does not mean that you are 'cured' of coronary heart disease.



See the CHSS booklet 'Understanding heart disease' for more information.

The need for 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', there are usually contributing factors.

- One of the aims of drug treatment is to prevent worsening of coronary heart disease: the underlying cause of most heart attacks.

Taking your prescribed medications is vital to reduce your risk of another heart attack.

- Report any side effects but do not stop taking any drugs suddenly or without your doctor's advice.
- Discuss all over the counter remedies with your pharmacist to make sure they won't interact with any prescribed drugs you are taking.

See the CHSS booklet 'Understanding heart disease' for more information about different types of medications for your heart.

Reducing your risk of another heart attack

The best way to prevent another heart attack is to understand what caused the first one and take steps to reduce your risk of having another heart attack.

- Remember that having treatment for a heart attack does not mean that you are 'cured' of coronary heart disease.

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 contribute to one happening. Reducing your risk factors can help you to reduce your risk of another heart attack.

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 'lifestyle risk factors' include:

- Smoking
- What and how much you eat
- Your weight
- How active you are
- How much alcohol you drink
- How much salt there is in your diet
- Recreational drugs

Stress is not considered a risk factor. However, prolonged stress can become a trigger for unhelpful behaviours, e.g. smoking, drinking too much alcohol, eating poorly and not getting enough physical activity. All of these behaviours can increase your risk of heart disease.

Remember that, with a bit of effort, you can change your lifestyle and habits can be broken. It is never too late to reduce your risk of another heart attack and there is support available to help you make any necessary changes. For support and advice call the CHSS Advice Line nurses on 0845 077 6000.



See the CHSS booklet 'Reducing the risk of heart disease' for more information.

Your role in your recovery

To get the most from your recovery you need to be pro-active: it can be helpful to think about this period as a new start and another chance. You have survived a heart attack and now you have a chance to take responsibility for the things you can change, and to work together with doctors and nurses to control the things you can't.

Reviewing your lifestyle isn't always easy. It may help to be honest with yourself and identify what things in your life you can change to improve your health. To begin with, try answering these questions:

Do you smoke?	Smoking increases your risk of heart disease and multiplies other risk factors you may have. By far the most important thing you can do for your heart is to stop smoking.
Do you know your 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 what your blood pressure is, is to have it measured.
Do you know your cholesterol level?	High cholesterol levels contributes to the fatty build up in the lining of your blood vessels, called atheroma, which increases the risk of heart disease.
Do you eat a healthy varied diet?	A diet that is rich in high fibre, low fat foods, with saturated fats replaced with unsaturated oils and contains five portions of fruit and vegetables a day can help to reduce your risk of heart disease.
Do you 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 you take enough exercise?	It is recommended that you aim to be moderately physically active for at least 30 minutes per day. Keeping active helps to lower high blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
Are you overweight?	Being overweight increases the work your heart has to do, causes high blood pressure, and can lead to high cholesterol levels.
Do you drink too much alcohol?	Drinking heavily increases your blood pressure and affects your cholesterol level.
Do you control your stress levels?	Stress can become a trigger for unhelpful behaviours such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, eating poorly and not getting enough physical activity. All of these behaviours can increase your risk of heart disease.
Do you use recreational drugs such as cocaine?	During the first hour after cocaine use, the risk of a heart attack increases by nearly 24 times. The risk of heart disease amongst cocaine users is compounded by other risk factors including smoking and drinking excess alcohol; the combination of all three can be a lethal cocktail. Prolonged cocaine use can cause heart failure and also lead to heart attack by more 'traditional' means; repetitive coronary artery spasm and episodes of hypertension caused by cocaine use can cause damage to the blood vessels and lead to atherosclerosis.



You may feel overwhelmed at the prospect of making changes to your lifestyle and taking control of your health: this is quite normal. Unhealthy habits usually develop over time but, with a bit of effort, these habits can be broken. 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 nurses for confidential advice and information (Tel no 0845 077 6000).

How will I feel?

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 and 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 and / or ignore the advice altogether. This can lead you to overdo things, trying to prove you are invincible or back to normal.

It's good to talk

If you keep these feelings, fears and worries to yourself then you may appear moody, irritable or to be behaving oddly. 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.

See the CHSS factsheets 'Living with stress and anxiety' and 'Coping with low mood / depression' for more information.

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 or nurse / therapist much more easily. Remember that you can speak to the CHSS Advice Line nurses in confidence on 0845 077 6000.

Moving on / making adjustments

Now is the time to start rebuilding your life - to start enjoying everyday activities once more and get back to your day to day routines. It is also the chance to start making positive changes to your lifestyle to reduce your risk of another heart attack / further heart disease.

- If you feel that you are losing your motivation try asking yourself how you would like your (and your families) life / your health to be in 2 years / 5 years etc. What can you do now to help make that happen?
- Ask family members and close friends to make changes with you (e.g. cutting down drinking) and encourage them to join in activities with you.



- Seek support in a way that suits you: this could include CHSS affiliated heart groups, online forums or interactive apps for your phone. NHS Choices have produced a 'health apps library' website: see useful addresses and websites section for details. Remember that anyone can develop a mobile app so always read reviews before you download / buy.
- Remember to pace yourself. Even though you may feel physically ok 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.
- Don't try too much too soon. Introducing changes gradually can increase your chance of establishing a healthier lifestyle.
- 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. Ask your GP about what support is offered in your area.

Even though you may feel better quickly, remember that a heart attack is serious. Recovery is possible and this is your chance to make healthier choices. Try to be patient with yourself and remember that it is ok to ask for support.

Useful addresses and websites

Alcohol Focus Scotland

www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk

Scotland's national charity working to reduce the harm caused by alcohol.

Health apps library

apps.nhs.uk

The Health Apps Library makes it simple for you to easily find safe and trusted apps to help you manage your health. These have been reviewed by the NHS to ensure they are clinically safe and relevant.

Smokeline

Tel: 0800 84 84 84 (7days a week: 8am – 10pm)

www.canstopsmoking.com

Smokeline offers initial and ongoing support and encouragement to callers wishing to stop smoking or who have recently stopped. Website offers online information and support.

Take Life on One Step at a time

www.takelifeon.co.uk

Take Life On is a campaign run by the Scottish government initiative Healthier Scotland. It aims to promote everyday changes to diet and lifestyle which can provide significant health benefits and will help to reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease and diabetes, and can make you feel really good about yourself.

Steps for Stress

www.stepsforstress.org

Website covers practical ways for you to deal with stress.

**If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line**

0845 077 6000

The Advice Line is open from Monday to Friday 9.30am - 4pm.