

Cardiac Rehabilitation: Optimizing the Road to Recovery

A lot of attention is given to what happens when someone is in the throes of a cardiac event, such as a heart attack. What happens in the aftermath?

Cardiac rehabilitation is specifically designed for anyone who had gone through such an event. From heart attack or bypass surgery to a heart failure diagnosis, patients can benefit greatly from this recovery-based intervention. Even those who experience chest pain upon exercising may find answers in undergoing cardiac rehab.

What Happens in Cardiac Rehab?

Just how soon a person can enter cardiac rehab depends on the type of cardiac issue at hand, as well as the individual patient. However, Lucy Bergenthal, Exercise Physiologist at Stoughton Hospital, says the timeline is typically two weeks after patients return home from the hospital.

“Sometimes, it's a little bit sooner if they're eager to get started—or a little bit later, depending on if they had a more invasive surgery.”

When a patient begins, they are put through a physical evaluation and medical history is discussed. Then, they perform some form of cardiovascular exercise—such as walking, bicycling, or using an “arm bike” where patients only use their upper body.

During the exercise portion, patients are hooked up to an EKG monitor so Bergenthal and her colleagues can assess heart rate, heart rhythm, and how they are responding to exercise. Blood pressure represents another key metric.

Exercise sessions are one hour in length, and patients typically get up to 36 sessions. “People usually come see us three days a week. So, we're with our patients for about 12 weeks,” notes Bergenthal.

How Do Patients Know Rehab Is Working?

“Progress” is apparent when patients’ heart rates during exercise are at about 20-30 beats per minute over one’s resting heart rate. As they improve, individuals are able to perform more intense exercise without their heart rate spiking—and for a longer duration.

It’s important to note that every patient’s journey is different in cardiac rehab. Some people have been avid exercisers their whole life and are really just wanting to make sure they are recovering in a safe manner—that they’re following a progression in a way that is safe for their heart and recovery.

Other patients have not exercised consistently throughout their life *at all*. They’re really learning the benefits of the exercise and how to structure each exercise session as they go along.

“I’d say, come in with an open mind and see what you can learn. How to structure the exercise and really get the benefits you're looking for. I always tell our patients that knowing your goals is really important to me. That way I can help you build your best exercise program possible,” explains Bergenthal.

Progress Doesn't End Here...

Once patients have completed the 36-session program, what is known as “phase two” cardiac rehab, they can then progress into phase three. Bergenthal describes this as the primary prevention program.

Patients still come in for an hour-long session, but they have a more active role in building their exercise regimens themselves. This carries over into their at-home life.

“I love when patients leave knowing they have the confidence and the skills to continue exercising on their own. Leaving with the tools to continue to exercise throughout their life,” she shares. “Our maintenance program is something we can offer to patients after cardiac rehab, where they can come in and use our facility to exercise in more of an unmonitored program. I think the most important thing we can offer is a way for patients to maintain their health through exercise. Really giving them the opportunity to learn more about heart health.”



***To listen to an in-depth conversation on this topic with Lucy Bergenthal, Exercise Physiologist at Stoughton Hospital, please follow this link: <https://radiomd.com/stoughton/item/46259>*