

How to Support Someone with Heart Disease

Caring for someone with heart disease can feel overwhelming. We're here to help support both you and the person you're caring for as you navigate the journey ahead.

Whether you've been caring for someone with heart disease for a few days or a few years, you know how demanding it can be. Cardiac events and diagnoses can be frightening, and treatment plans can be complex. It is completely natural to feel overwhelmed at times. Fortunately, there are ways to smooth out the journey for both you and the person you're caring for. The following tips, resources and recommendations can help you navigate the road ahead with more confidence and peace of mind.

Understand the Treatment Plan

If you're not already familiar with your friend or family member's treatment plan, get details right away. Talk to the person you care for (if he or she is capable of informing you) or by making an appointment with their doctor. Explain that you are the primary caregiver and that you want to know the details of the plan. Ask for printed materials if possible, too.

According to the American Heart Association (AHA), typical treatment plans might include:

- ✓ Quitting smoking for good (if your loved one is a smoker).
- ✓ Maintaining a normal blood pressure through dietary changes and exercise. A normal blood pressure is less than 120 systolic/80 diastolic Hg. (The higher a person's blood pressure, the harder his or her heart has to work.)
- ✓ Closely following the physician-outlined medication protocol.

Your family member or friend should also follow whatever other instructions the physician has when it comes to things like stress management or nutrition guidelines.



Encourage Healthy Habits

- ✓ Help your friend or family member lower their blood pressure if it's above the normal range. Two ways to do this are by making low-sodium meals and encouraging them to enjoy daily exercise. The AHA recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week.
- ✓ Losing weight is often helpful for heart disease patients. Try taking small steps in the right direction each week. Serve smaller portions at meals the first week, nix evening snacking the second week, and so on. But don't make any big changes without consulting his or her medical team.
- ✓ Ask the physician about other healthy habits you can encourage in your friend or family member. Each heart disease situation is different.
- ✓ As a caregiver, you can offer small incentives for healthy habits. Something as simple as promising an outing to a movie once your friend or family member has exercised five days in a row can keep things positive and fun.

Watch for Symptoms

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 800,000 people have a heart attack each year in the United States. That can seem daunting, but knowing the warning signs for a heart attack or stroke can help you get someone medical attention sooner.

Call 9-1-1 right away if you, your friend or family member notice any of the following:

Heart Attack Warning Signs

- Chest discomfort, usually in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. This discomfort might feel like pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.
- Shortness of breath with or without chest discomfort.
- Breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

Stroke Warning Signs

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of body.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding.
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden and severe headache with no known cause.

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Seek More Support If You Need It

As with all caregiving situations, it's important that you accept and seek support. Take people up on their offers to help with preparing healthy meals, doing housework, or spending time with the person under your care for a few hours so you can rest, take care of personal needs, or even treat yourself to some self-care, like a massage or attending a support group for caregivers.

In some cases, a person's condition can be too much to handle without specific medical training. If you're concerned that you're not able to provide someone with the care they require, talk with their medical team right away. In some cases, and with a doctor's authorization, patients on Medicare may qualify for stays in rehabilitation facilities or qualify for home health-aid visits. Explore all of the options that might be available to you by speaking to medical team members and calling all insurance providers.

Caring for someone with heart disease is a big job. You are playing a huge role in helping your friend or family member manage their condition and optimize their ability to have a heart-healthy future. It's a vital role — and you should feel great about it!

Sources:

American heart association: Taking care of yourself

<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/cardiac-rehab/taking-care-of-yourself>

Heart disease facts

<https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm>

Science Daily: Reducing recurrence of heart attacks, death in patients with cardiovascular disease

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170105144343.htm>

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