

Cardiac rehab: what actually happens there

Cardiac rehab is a supervised programme of exercise, education and support for people recovering from heart surgery — and it's one of the most useful things you'll ever be offered, or can ask for.

Returning to everyday life

Educational draft. Clinical review pending. Quotations retained from the original text are not verified member testimonials.

Cardiac rehab is a structured programme of supervised exercise, education and support for people recovering from heart surgery or a heart event — and it is one of the most valuable things you will be offered, or can ask for. It is not a gym class and not a lecture series. It's a small team of specialists — nurses, physiotherapists, sometimes dietitians and psychologists — whose whole job is helping you rebuild strength and confidence safely.

What actually happens

1. An assessment first. A nurse or physiotherapist talks through how you're doing, and your exercise starts from where you are — not from where a textbook says you should be.
2. Supervised exercise sessions, usually a few times a week: bikes, walking, gentle strength work — with monitors on and staff watching your heart rate and symptoms throughout.
3. Education sessions: how your medicines work, what to eat, how to recognise warning signs, how to manage stress and sleep.
4. Time with other people in the same boat, at different stages of recovery. This is often the biggest surprise: how much it helps to be around people who truly get it.

What it means for real people

Rehab is often where “I’m scared to move” becomes “I know what my body can do”. People describe it as the place they stopped being a patient and started being a person again. You will be tired after early sessions — that’s normal. You do not need to be fit to join; people arrive at every possible level, from barely walking to nearly back to normal. The only requirement is showing up.

What to ask your team

Not everyone is automatically offered a place — you can ask for one. Ask: is there a cardiac rehab programme I can join, and how do I get referred? When does it start and where is it? What do I need to bring — my medication list, my discharge notes, loose clothes? Can a family member come to the first session?

Take it to your team

Ask: how do I get referred to cardiac rehab? When and where does it run, and how long is the programme? What should I do if I feel unwell on a session day — come anyway or call first? If I can’t attend, can I follow a plan at home instead?

Call for help if

During or after exercise you get chest pain, dizziness, severe breathlessness or an irregular heartbeat — stop immediately and tell the staff. That is exactly what they’re there for. Never push through those symptoms to prove something.

I was terrified of my own heartbeat for weeks. At rehab, the physiotherapist made me walk on a treadmill with a monitor and said: look, it’s fast — and it’s fine. It was the first moment I trusted my heart again.

A last word

Rehab is offered because it helps — not as a test of your character. Attending it is not a sign of weakness, and skipping it is not a sign of strength. Your participation, your exercise plan and any changes to it belong to your own team — made with you, and always at your pace.

Questions to take to my team

☐ How do I get referred to cardiac rehabilitation, and when and where does it run?

☐ How long is the programme, and what should I bring to my first session?

☐ Can a family member come with me?

☐ What should I do if I feel unwell on a session day?

☐ If I cannot attend, is a supervised home programme available?

For discussion and personal reference. Your care team's individual instructions take priority. For an emergency, contact your local emergency service; do not wait for a community reply.