Messaging for Exercising and Cardiac Rehab for Cardiac Patients Staying at Home During COVID-19

From the Exercise and Cardiac Rehab Committee of the AHA Council on Clinical Cardiology
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Should I be worried about starting, or restarting cardiac rehab?

Many heart conditions are best treated with a combination of medications and an exercise program. For some heart conditions, it is particularly important to begin cardiac rehab within a couple weeks (2-4 weeks at most) of receiving a diagnosis. For example, patients recovering from a recent heart attack, or those who have undergone a coronary artery bypass graft (“CABG”) surgery, get the most benefit from cardiac rehab when the exercise program is started early on after the event. In the past, it was thought that the heart needed a long time to rest after a major event such as a heart attack. However, we now know that this is not the case, and patients need to begin exercising soon after recovery.

This does not mean that exercise is not important for people with other types of heart conditions. During this unique period of time, when our society is learning to adjust to COVID-19, medical professionals are focusing first on those patients who are in the greatest need of starting, or restarting an exercise program, while also creating an environment where both the patient, and rehab staff members, are protected by following recommendations from the CDC on social distancing.

Can I exercise at home?

It may be possible for patients to exercise at home. However, before doing this, patients should talk to their doctor about whether it is safe to exercise when they are not being monitored by a medical professional. For example, some patients with heart diseases like heart failure, arrhythmias, and people who experience chest pain with very low levels of activity, should not exercise at home without a medical expert to monitor them. Such monitoring can be aided by technology including HR monitors, cell phone apps, and even devices that can check a heart rhythm and send it to your healthcare team in case of unusual symptoms.
Many rehab centers are creating home-based rehab programs to help patients follow a structured exercise program during this time of closures. This type of program should include a regular phone call, for example, once per week, where the patient can “check-in” with a rehab specialist or doctor to review the type of exercise being performed, answer any questions that arise, and provide any extra educational resources to help patients reach their goals. However, before doing a home-based exercise program, patients should have a discussion with their healthcare team to go over the kinds of exercise that are safe, and how much exercise is appropriate.

Can I exercise if I have tested positive for COVID-19?

COVID-19 may affect the heart in different ways. Generally, it is not recommended that cardiac patients exercise when they have an active COVID-19 infection. Tests, such as bloodwork, an ECG or echocardiogram may be done to make sure a patient’s heart is working normally after a COVID-19 infection and before an exercise program is started or restarted. A patient who has a COVID-19 infection, or recently suffered from one, should not start to exercise without first talking to their healthcare team.