



Returning to work after cardiac illness

After a heart attack (myocardial infarction), heart surgery (coronary artery bypass graft surgery) or percutaneous coronary intervention (coronary artery balloon angioplasty with stent insertion), many people feel insecure about returning to work. The time of resuming work is generally related to the clearing of physical symptoms (chest pain, shortness of breath) and to psychological recovery.

After a heart attack, most people are able to resume work within some weeks: say 4 to 8 weeks for non manual workers and 8 to 12 weeks for manual workers. A coronary bypass operation is a major surgical procedure, so that physical recovery to a level of fitness for work may take longer. Coronary balloon angioplasty and stenting is a much lesser procedure and work can be resumed within days or a few weeks.

Many patients return to work late or do not resume work at all. For some this presents no problems: they were approaching retirement and rationally decided not to resume work. For others, not returning to work proves to be disastrous, leading to poverty, loss of morale, reduction of self image and worth, family distress, the development of depression and despair.

Unless there is good reason to retire, it is most desirable that all should resume working. There are many reasons why work resumption does not occur.

Here are just three of these:

1. "So I have a severe heart condition. Why me? What caused this? I don't accept that it was caused by my smoking, my raised blood pressure, my high cholesterol level, my being overweight, my lack of exercise, my diabetes. That applied to others. I think it was the work. My friends tell me to ease up, to take it easy, to slow down, not to worry, not to feel stressed. People say that stress can cause heart disease and heart attacks. If I go back to work I'm likely to become ill again. I might die". (The medical evidence is that resumption of work is, if anything, beneficial. The real risk factors listed above need to be addressed not the nature of work).

2. "Hard physical work puts a strain on the heart and hence should be avoided. I've been told not to strain or lift heavy objects. So I can't go back to that". (Yes, you can, but first you need to recover your fitness and strength. Physically active or demanding work is protective against developing heart disease, unless it is extreme or unusual for you).

3. "I have been given a medical certificate saying that I am fit to resume 'suitable light work'. I have since been told that there is no 'suitable light work' and my employment has been terminated". (This type of certificate shifts the responsibility for your future from the doctor to the employer or foreman, who are unable to accept that responsibility. A proper medical certificate for work resumption should define what can and cannot be done – if there needs to be any restriction at all. Further, graded resumption of work is usually possible if any problems are defined and addressed).

The first two of these problems are based upon fear and lack of understanding and upon the shifting of blame from oneself to others. The third problem arises because of lack of understanding of the nature of work requirements and levels of work capacity between employers, employees and health professionals.

These and many other problems related to recovery and work resumption after cardiac illness are addressed in cardiac rehabilitation programs. Cardiac rehabilitation programs are available to all patients after cardiac illness. Many patients, however, do not attend. The programs consist of activities or exercise schedules to improve physical recovery, and education programs to assure an understanding of heart disease and how it can be prevented from progressing or occurring. They also should offer guidance and support regarding concerns surrounding return to work.

Some people may require a high level of fitness or strength to perform specific work activities. This can be achieved through specific training at an increasing level of work. The worker may then return to work with confidence which can be shared with the employer, foreman and work-mates as well as the worker's doctor, who can certify specifically about this individual person in that particular job.

In cardiac rehabilitation programs there are nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, physicians, social workers and others with specific skills to handle in advance any potential problems related to resuming work.

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2005

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