Heart Health and Rehab

Exercising Safely When You Have a Heart Condition

1 Why Heart Health Matters in Rehab

Cardiovascular fitness affects how well your body delivers oxygen to healing tissues, how quickly you recover between exercise sets, and your overall endurance during rehab. Conditions such as hypertension, coronary artery disease, heart failure, and arrhythmias are all common among people attending rehabilitation — but they do not mean exercise should be avoided.

> Exercise is one of the most powerful medicines for heart health — the goal is to find the right type and intensity for your situation, not to avoid exercise.

2 How Your Heart Responds to Exercise

What Happens During Exercise	Why It Matters for Rehab
Heart rate increases	Delivers more oxygen to working muscles — monitor your exertion level.
Blood pressure rises temporarily	Normal during exercise; discuss safe ranges with your team.
Cardiac output increases	Your heart pumps more blood per minute — fitness improves this efficiency.
Recovery heart rate	Fitter hearts return to resting rate faster — a useful sign of improving fitness.

3 Safe Exercise Guidelines

Principle	Guidance
Warm up and cool down	Always allow 5–10 minutes of light movement — avoids sudden cardiovascular stress.
Use perceived exertion	Aim for "somewhat hard" (RPE 12–14/20) — able to talk but breathing harder.
Avoid Valsalva manoeuvre	Don't hold your breath during effort — breathe continuously throughout.

Watch for warning signs	Stop and rest if: chest pain, dizziness, unusual breathlessness, or palpitations.
Medication timing	Some medications affect heart rate response — discuss exercise timing with your GP.

4 Warning Signs — When to Stop

Warning Sign	What to Do
Chest pain or tightness	Stop immediately; rest; seek medical advice if it persists.
Unusual breathlessness at low effort	Rest; contact your GP if it continues.
Dizziness or lightheadedness	Stop; sit down; report to your clinician.
Palpitations or irregular heartbeat	Rest; monitor; contact your GP if frequent or new.
Swollen ankles (new or worsening)	Mention to your GP — may indicate fluid retention.

5 Key Takeaways

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Exercise is medicine for your heart. Regular, appropriately dosed exercise strengthens the heart muscle, improves circulation, and helps control blood pressure and cholesterol. The goal of rehab is not to protect you from exercise — it is to help you do it safely and progressively.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Know your signals and your safe zone. Learn to recognise warning signs such as chest pain, unusual breathlessness, or dizziness, and act on them. Between sessions, aim for an exertion level where you can hold a conversation — that is usually within a safe range for most cardiac conditions.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

Work with your team, not around them. Your clinician and GP can adjust your programme as your fitness improves. Always tell them about new or changing symptoms, and ask about medication timing before changing your exercise routine.