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DAMIAN RASCH, D.O.

ENCINITAS · LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA



Cardiac Rehabilitation

A supervised program of exercise, education and support after a heart event or procedure. Who qualifies and what to expect.

About 26%
lower risk of dying from heart disease, in a 2023 review of 85 trials

36
sessions of about an hour, 2 to 3 a week for 12 to 18 weeks

18–33%
fewer return trips to the hospital

WHAT A SESSION LOOKS LIKE

About an hour, with a nurse checking on you first

A wireless heart monitor tracks your rhythm while you exercise

Check-in	Warm-up	Aerobic	Resistance	Cool-down	Education
5–10 min	5 min	20–25 min	10–15 min	5 min	5–15 min

About an hour in all

Main exercise, 30 to 40 minutes

A nurse checks your blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen level and weight, and asks about new symptoms or medication changes. Staff watch every patient's rhythm on a monitor wall and pause a session right away if something looks off. Light weights and bands start after the first few sessions.

WHO QUALIFIES

Medicare covers it after any of these

Heart attack
Within the past 12 months. Both major types count.

Stent
One stent or several, also called PCI or angioplasty.

Bypass surgery
Also called CABG.

Valve procedure
Surgical repair or replacement, TAVR or MitraClip.

Heart transplant
Recovery after the transplant.

Stable angina
Predictable chest pain with exertion that eases with rest.

Heart failure
Pumping fraction (EF) of 35% or below, on heart failure medications.

Leg artery disease
A separate Medicare benefit, supervised exercise therapy, covers it.

Ask for the referral

If you've had one of these and nobody has referred you, ask your cardiologist. If you've been referred and haven't started, call the rehab center and schedule the orientation.

WEEK BY WEEK

From orientation to graduation

Orientation	Weeks 1–4	Weeks 5–8	Weeks 9–12	After
90 minutes to 2 hours	**The foundation**	**Ramping up**	**Consolidating**	**Maintenance**
Baseline walk test and your exercise plan	Short, gentle workouts at a safe baseline	More aerobic time and real resistance work	A home exercise plan for after graduation	A walking routine, a gym or a community program

Effort is often rated on the Borg scale, where 6 is no effort and 20 is all-out. Programs usually start at 11 to 13 and move up to 12 to 14. In the talk test, you should be able to speak in short sentences but not hold a full conversation.

WHAT IT DOES

2023 review of 85 trials, 23,430 patients

Fewer heart deaths	About 26% lower risk of dying from heart disease and 18% fewer heart attacks. Death from any cause came out about the same. Rehab adds to what your medicines do.
Fewer hospital stays	18 to 33% fewer readmissions, which means more time at home.
More stamina	Exercise capacity usually rises by 1.5 to 3 METs (a standard unit of exercise effort), enough to walk farther and climb more stairs.
Mood and work	Screening for depression and anxiety, and a better chance of getting back to work.

IN PERSON OR AT HOME

outcomes are comparable for most people

At a center	A hospital or clinic gym with the team in the room. Often the better start in the first weeks after bypass surgery, with a very weak and unstable heart or with complex rhythm problems.
Virtual	Live video sessions from home with a monitoring kit. A good fit if you live far away, work weekdays or don't drive. Medicare pays for virtual sessions under temporary telehealth rules, so check coverage first.
Cost	Medicare and most plans cover it. With insurance, the full program usually costs $0 to about $1,500 out of pocket.

ON SESSION DAYS

Clothes and food	Workout clothes, supportive sneakers and a small meal 1 to 2 hours before. With diabetes, check your sugar before and after at first.
Medications	Take your usual morning pills, including beta-blockers and blood thinners, unless your cardiologist has told you otherwise. Bring your nitroglycerin, and ask about adjusting insulin.
A bad day	With new shortness of breath, fever or unusual fatigue, call the rehab center first. For chest pain at home, rest, use nitroglycerin as you were told, and call 911 if it doesn't go away.

IS EXERCISE SAFE NOW?

A supervised program is one of the safest places to get moving again after a heart event. Cardiac events happen about once per 50,000 patient-hours of supervised exercise, and the team is trained to handle any symptom that comes up.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

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For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include the Dibben review of 85 trials (European Heart Journal 2023), the 2024 AHA/AACVPR core components statement and the 2019 AACVPR/AHA/ACC home-based rehabilitation statement.

DR. DAMIAN RASCH, D.O. · BOARD-CERTIFIED INVASIVE CARDIOLOGIST · ENCINITAS AND LA JOLLA, CA

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