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DAMIAN RASCH, D.O.

ENCINITAS · LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA



Myocarditis

Inflammation of the heart muscle. What causes it, the symptoms to know and why recovery takes rest, time and follow-up.

75%
of hospitalized patients have an uncomplicated course and full recovery

82–95%
of patients have chest pain, the most common symptom

3–6 months
with no strenuous activity, typically at least this long in a mild case

WHAT'S HAPPENING

An irritated, swollen heart muscle

A trigger
Most often a virus, about 70% of the time, like the flu, a cold or COVID-19

→

The immune system responds
Chemical messengers (cytokines) call in more immune cells

→

The response misfires
and damages heart muscle cells

→

The muscle
can swell, stiffen and pump less efficiently

The wiring
palpitations, irregular beats, dangerous rhythms if severe

Myocarditis is inflammation of the heart muscle, much like the way your throat gets inflamed with a sore throat. About 70% of the time the trigger is a virus, including the ones behind the flu, colds and COVID-19. Other causes include autoimmune diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis or inflammatory bowel disease, and certain cancer treatments called immune checkpoint inhibitors. Even with extensive testing, a specific trigger is found in only about 50% of cases. Whatever the trigger turns out to be, nothing you did caused it.

SYMPTOMS TO KNOW

It can feel like the flu at first

Chest pain
Often sharp, stabbing or a constant ache that worsens when you lie flat or take deep breaths.

Shortness of breath
In about 19–49% of patients. Winded on stairs you used to take easily, or needing extra pillows to sleep.

Palpitations or fatigue
Inflammation can reach the heart's electrical system and cause irregular beats. Many also feel unusually tired.

Myocarditis should be considered if you've had fever, body aches or a sore throat in the past few weeks and now have chest pain or unusual fatigue. Young adults and teens, especially men ages 20 to 30, make up a large share of cases. Women may have fatigue and shortness of breath without chest pain.

Know the warning signs

Severe chest pain, marked shortness of breath and fainting are the concerning symptoms. If you have one, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

TREATMENT, EXERCISE AND RECOVERY ARE ON THE BACK

TREATMENT AND RECOVERY

Rest, the right medicines and time

TREATMENT FITS THE SITUATION

Mild cases	About 75% of the patients Dr. Rasch sees. Treatment supports your heart while it heals on its own, and rest is the foundation.
Pain relief	Acetaminophen is usually the first choice. Ibuprofen helps chest pain but is used cautiously, because some studies suggest it might interfere with healing.
A weaker pump	With an ejection fraction (the share of blood pumped out with each beat) below 40%, heart failure medicines such as ACE inhibitors or ARBs and beta-blockers. Many people can stop them as the heart recovers.
Severe cases	Hospital care, sometimes with medicines like dobutamine to help the heart pump, or a machine such as ECMO that takes over while the heart heals.
Steroids	Reserved for specific causes such as an autoimmune condition or certain medications. In viral myocarditis they might worsen outcomes by getting in the way of your body clearing the infection.

GETTING BACK TO EXERCISE



No strenuous activity
Typically for at least 3 to 6 months in a mild case

Light walking
The starting point for a gradual return

Moderate exercise
Only after repeat testing shows stable heart function

Competitive athletes
The process might take 6 to 12 months, with formal exercise testing at each stage

Coming back too soon can worsen the inflammation, trigger dangerous heart rhythms or lead to sudden cardiac death. These restrictions are safety measures. Most patients eventually return to their previous activity levels.

NORMAL DURING RECOVERY

Good and bad days	You might feel almost normal one day and tired and short of breath the next. That doesn't mean you're getting worse.
Lingering fatigue	It can last weeks or months after other symptoms improve, while the heart muscle remodels and strengthens.
Worry about your heart	Some anxiety is understandable. If it's affecting your sleep or daily life, tell your physician, since counseling or medicine can sometimes help.

FOLLOW-UP

Check-ups	Typically at 6 months and 1 year, then periodically based on your situation. Most people recover completely, but some develop heart muscle or rhythm problems years later.
Test results	You might feel wonderful with abnormal results, or tired while tests improve. Your care team weighs symptoms, the exam and testing together.

CAN I SPEED IT UP?

Your heart muscle doesn't need detoxification. Fad diets and supplements won't speed recovery and might interfere with your prescribed medicines. Rest, appropriate treatment and time are what help it heal.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

damianrasch.com/myocarditis

For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include the 2024 ACC Expert Consensus Decision Pathway on myocarditis, Ammirati and Moslehi (JAMA 2023), Basso (NEJM 2022) and the 2020 AHA statement on fulminant myocarditis.

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

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