

# Gardening

*A guide for people  
with heart conditions*



**ACPICR**

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists  
In Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

Gardening can be a very rewarding way of keeping active in order to maintain and improve fitness and well-being. There is a wide range of gardening activities, some are light and easier to do, others are more strenuous and may be more challenging. Different fitness levels are required to tackle different gardening tasks.

## What are the benefits?

- Has a **positive** impact on physical, mental and emotional health
- Improves and maintains **stamina**
- Increases and maintains muscle **strength, endurance** and joint **suppleness**
- Increases and maintains **balance** and **co-ordination**
- Improves **confidence** and can help **alleviate stress**

## When can I start?

Starting will vary depending on your own circumstances and specific heart condition

If you have a **Pacemaker or Implantable Cardioverter Device (ICD)** you may need to wait six weeks after your procedure to allow the leads to settle before certain arm activities.

Power tools may temporarily affect the normal function of your ICD so use of these should be avoided.

If you have had **Open-Heart Surgery** you should be cautious with strenuous arm activity for the first 12 weeks e.g. lifting heavy garden pots and mowing the lawn. This will help to minimise problems with healing of the breastbone.

## How can I get started?

It is sensible to **start with lighter** tasks eg dead heading flowers and light pruning rather than anything that involves bending, digging, pushing and heavy lifting. You may need to build up your **flexibility, stamina, strength** and **balance** to be able to carry out some heavier gardening tasks but as your fitness improves you will be able to progress to more challenging activities.

As with any activity, **start low and go slow**, build up gradually and **pace** yourself. Don't try to do too much at first, progress slowly over a few weeks.



## What about warm up and cool down?

It depends on what and how much you plan to do.

If you are planning a longer session the **easier** gardening tasks should be at the **beginning** and at the **end** of the session.

For example e.g. start and finish with easier activities such as potting, light weeding, planting out seedlings, tidying up beds, and light pruning.

Stop the activity if you experience any chest discomfort, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or GTN spray/tablets, seek medical advice as soon as possible.





## How should I feel?

You should feel **comfortable** and **able to continue** with the activity. You shouldn't feel so breathless that you can't talk. It is fine to feel that you are **exerting yourself**, if you do find yourself struggling try to make tasks easier or do less when you're in the garden.

If you feel exhausted following your gardening session, you may have done too much or the activity may have been too demanding for you.

If you have **attended cardiac rehabilitation** think about how you feel compared with how you felt in the exercise sessions your level of exertion should be similar.

## How do I make things easier?

You may need to find ways to **make jobs easier** in the short and long term. **Plan and prioritise** your gardening schedule particularly if you are recovering from a heart event.

Try not to change positions too frequently eg bending down and standing up as this could make you feel dizzy or lightheaded.

Having raised beds or using a garden kneeler will **limit bending**. Select tools carefully and consider purchasing lighter weight ones or power tools that are easier to start.

Use a lightweight wheelbarrow or trolley and don't overload it.

Half fill watering cans or use a hose.

Some gardening tasks eg hedge-cutting/pruning, sweeping leaves may be particularly strenuous and can be much harder work for your heart.

Consider **asking someone** else to **assist** or do the task for you.

## Other things to consider

- **Avoid holding your breath** when performing tasks that require effort
- Dress appropriately for the **weather** conditions
- Don't garden straight after **eating** a large meal.



**Stop exercising if you experience any chest discomfort, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or your GTN spray/tablets, seek medical advice as soon as possible.**

This guidance is based on available evidence and expert opinion.

Produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Cardiovascular Rehabilitation.

This leaflet is not intended to replace the advice that your doctor or CR team give you based on their expert knowledge of your condition.

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