

MY TOP 10 TIPS & TOOLS for Your Entry into Cardiac Land

1. **Assemble your Medical Notebook.** The foundation for managing life in Cardiac Land, your Medical Notebook keeps all your most vital health information in one portable place—an ordinary 3-ring binder. (Choose one with a pocket in the front cover to hold a signed copy of your Living Will/Advance Health Care Directive, needed for every hospitalization.) My Medical Notebook’s 6 brightly tabbed sections have turned out to be the agenda for every check-up:

1. Diagnosis & Doctors (a handy summary for an emergency or routine medical check-in)
2. Medications (including dosages, timing, allergies)
3. Vitals (blood pressure, heart rate, and weight)
4. Tests, Shots & Procedures (EKGs, blood work, biopsies, flu shots, mammograms, etc.)
5. Lipids (cholesterol and triglyceride levels)
6. Questions & Next Steps (your personal agenda for discussion with your clinicians).

More information and annotated, downloadable forms are on www.deborahdawheffernan.com.

2. **Create an Emergency Call List**—a laminated, mini-directory of people to call in an emergency. My list is the size of an index card and includes

- 1-3 key doctors (including pagers)
- 1-3 personal contacts (family/friends on your core team)
- the local hospital/ambulance service.

Post your Emergency Call List by every home phone and by your phone at work, whether that’s in a truck or at a desk. Carry a copy with you, keep one in your car, and give copies to your personal emergency contacts. You will feel much calmer and in control knowing that no one will have to scramble for these numbers in an emergency.

3. **Set up your “Control Central”**—a peaceful place at home that is dedicated to managing your health. You will need a comfortable, straight-backed seat (for taking blood pressure readings); a small table for sorting and consuming your medications, as well as for working in your Medical Notebook; a pill cutter and a weekly pill organizer (at your drugstore). Keep your special place neat, clean, and *cheery*. You see, we patients confront our mortality every time we load up on meds or take our blood pressure. Some days I just toss the pills and liquids down my throat and get on with it. Other days I sit there among the bottles and wonder, “How can this be my life?” I usually put a flower in a vase little on my table to remind me that life is right here. You might add a picture that moves or motivates you. My cozy spot offers quiet and privacy in which the occasional despair can move through me to become the gratitude I truly feel.

4. Consider purchasing a Home Emergency Response System—a bracelet or necklace with a button that you press to summon an ambulance, when you cannot make the call yourself. Some systems can sense a sudden fall and send the EMTs automatically.

Both liberating and anxiety reducing, “alarm jewelry” is far less invasive than round-the-clock supervision by loved ones and strangers. My little “alarm watch,” as I called it in *AN ARROW THROUGH THE HEART*, allowed Jack to return to work and me to walk around outside. Everyone could be confident that I’d be found and saved in the huckleberry bushes if I had another attack of ventricular tachycardia (a deadly arrhythmia). In the end, I never needed to press the button during my nine most fragile years with heart failure, but it made all the difference in my peace of mind, which is of vital importance to one’s health.

Do some on-line research for which system and options are right for you; for example, consider coverage range if you like to spend time outside. Ask friends or your local ambulance company for their recommendations. After you purchase your system, consider visiting your monitoring service, usually your local ambulance company. Suggest a trial run to identify all the places you might be found on your property. Get to know the people who may save your life. I blow kisses to my EMTs in the grocery store. These people are as kind and dedicated as they come.

5. Purchase a Medic Alert bracelet—or any of the wearable identifying emblems from the Medic Alert Foundation (www.medicalert.org or 1-800-432-5378). The tiny, universally recognized emblem lists one phone number that an emergency responder can call for your diagnosis, medications, allergies, and key doctor’s contact information. Wearing a Medic Alert emblem assures you of quick, correct assistance, a huge comfort as you step back into the world.

6. Join a cardiac rehab program as soon as your doctors give you permission. I am a 3-time graduate of rehab and each time I have benefited hugely. You will gain strength and confidence much faster and more solidly than if you avoid this step in your return to LIFE. Make sure your rehab program emphasizes mind/body training based on the work of Herbert Benson, MD.

As part of your cardiac rehab, **schedule a few chats with a good psychotherapist**. This essential step toward full recovery is often overlooked by doctors. I suggest that good psychotherapy should be an integral part of rehab because every patient is emotionally affected by a cardiac event, no matter how small. Increased anxiety is entirely normal, I have learned. While it’s important to discuss your feelings with your loved ones, they may only be able to help you so much. They, too, may be experiencing trauma from the event and need a little psychotherapeutic support. So I urge you and your family to seek good coaching support from professionals trained to help us heal our minds and spirits—while you are also learning to walk again with a spring in your step.

7. **Subscribe immediately to the *Harvard Heart Letter*** (www.health.harvard.edu)—or any of the other fine newsletters published by major cardiac centers—for the latest cardiovascular information, in layman’s language. Remember, ignorance can stoke panic or dangerous avoidance. Information offers perspective and builds confidence.

8. **Make your Living Will/Advance Health Care Directive and your Power of Attorney.** I know. No one wants to do this and neither did I. But you must. While you are in organizing mode, just do it. Knowing your wishes, your loved ones will suffer less. Free, downloadable forms are on-line. I also suggest consulting a lawyer to be sure your documents are compatible with state law; for example, I live in one state and am treated in two. Finally, *keep a signed copy of these documents in your Medical Notebook*, because they are needed at every hospitalization.

9. **Put YOU on your schedule first.** *This single change in how I manage my life has been transformative!* Here’s how it works: Every 3 to 6 months, I schedule medical appointments, complementary care (massage, osteopathy, reflexology, facial), and daily exercise (a walk or snowshoe, yoga, swimming, pilates)—before I schedule anything else. All other obligations and fun are scheduled around my primary commitment to health. And guess what, all you folks who feel indispensable at home and on the job? No one has even noticed that I now put myself first. Neither has anyone expressed feeling neglected. Since having learned to “place the oxygen cup over my own face first, before assisting others,” as I wrote in ARROW, I feel more available and effective as a wife, friend, sister, colleague, step-parent, and step-grandparent to 17!

10. **Move. Move your body a lot—every day, most minutes of the day.** You will be given a lot of instruction on a heart-healthy diet. And you will be told to exercise. But I find that people overlook the importance and ease of making little movements all day long. Jiggle a leg, Rise up and down on your toes while you wait in line. Before getting out of bed in the morning and falling asleep at night, put your legs in the air and flex your ankles, twirl your feet. When you walk along streets, hallways, and grocery store aisles, let your whole body unfurl. Stretch your legs and feet; swing your arms and hips. Hold your shoulders back and your chest high. Open your heart with your whole body.

In other words, do not confine movement to exercise time. Medical advice varies on how much exercise is necessary, but everyone agrees that it matters a lot—in combination with a healthful diet. So make conscious movement part of your daily life, keeping your blood circulating and your spirits up. I can’t count how many times a day I lean on a counter with my arms outstretched, walk my feet back until my upper body is parallel to the floor and my legs are squarely under my hips, and then move into “downward dog,” my favorite yoga pose. Yes, you, too, can practice yoga on your kitchen counter while waiting for the toast to pop up.

Best wishes to you from me!