



**Left** ▶▶ Dr. Paul Oh (centre) leads monitored drills, one component of the cardiac rehab and prevention program

**Below** ▶▶ Cardiac rehab participant Jeff Hohner racing a 5K just a few months after his triple bypass surgery

**Bottom** ▶▶ Members of the Toronto Rehab cardiac running team at the Rumsey Centre's indoor track

signed up for a 22-week program, where he met others also navigating a new reality.

“When people have a cardiac event, they are petrified because it’s often the first time their bodies let them down,” says Rob Bertelink, a registered kinesiologist and cardiac rehab supervisor at the institute.

The Rumsey Centre has an indoor and outdoor track, a full-scale gym, laboratory, and other leading-edge medical equipment made for an all-service facility to help uncertain people feel safe as they work to regain confidence in their bodies and selves. Personalized programs cater to people diagnosed with cardiac conditions, diabetes and cancer.

# Cardiac Rehab Runners Rise to Run Again

By **Tania Haas**

“I AM GRATEFUL I HAD A HEART ATTACK,” says Jeff Hohner. Being grateful, he explained, is all part of the process of accepting his new normal, which introduced itself during a morning run in October 2013.

Hohner, then 48, remembers running with a surreal feeling. He thought it was a maybe a chest cold, or a pulled muscle. That would make sense, he justified. His runs were getting slower and shorter. But he’d recently run a 10K with his 16-year-old daughter. In the four years leading up to that October morning, Hohner had completed two half-marathons and a marathon. He wasn’t overweight. He had no cholesterol issues. Sure, his grandfather died at 48 of a heart attack. But Hohner, with his MBA-measured-thinking, figured his eating habits and running offset that fate.

Shortness of breath. Weight on chest. Shooting pain down arm. Numb legs and fingers. It wasn’t until he stumbled onto his driveway that he realized what was going on.

“I’m not going to die today,” he remembers thinking.

At the hospital, the head cardiologist told Hohner his running had saved his life. “Your heart was strong enough to withstand the trauma of what you went through,” Hohner was told. Three stents later and medication to treat a fourth blocked artery, Hohner was limited to a bed, unable to walk. Within a few weeks, he tentatively walked into the Rumsey Centre of the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute outpatient cardiac program, the largest and most comprehensive program of its kind in Canada. Hohner



Cardiovascular disease is the number one cause of death in Canada. Once someone has a heart incident, the risk of future problems or an early death rises. Cardiac rehab programs are founded on the belief that fitness equals survival and its methods cut down those odds.

“Fitness is the one thing that our research here has shown consistently over many decades,” says Dr. Paul Oh, medical director and scientist at Toronto Rehab. “Fitness is one of the strongest things we can modify to reduce the chance of another heart attack or dying. If you do the program, and do it regularly, maybe run or walk five times a week, your chance of something bad happening reduces by 25 to 50 per cent.”

Toronto Rehab treats around 1,800 people a year, and there are at least 260 similar programs across the country. The Toronto Rehab program emphasizes self-managed behavioural change through education on nutrition, aerobic exercise and resistance training and stress management. Students learn a range of topics from anatomy to working out in cold weather. The fitness element introduces gradual increased running exercises supervised by telemetry (monitoring heart rate and blood pressure) and a team of specialized professionals. There’s homework, both written and physical. There’s a completion rate of about 66 per cent. As anyone who’s missed a resolution knows, breaking unhelpful habits isn’t easy.

Yet even under the guidance of precise guidance and supportive professionals, repeat heart incidents can occur. On Hohner’s last day of his 22-week rehab program during a walk-run series on the track, he started to feel red-flag symptoms. It was that fourth artery being treated with medication. It wasn’t working right. The facility was prepared for such incidents and he was easily admitted to the hospital next door. A few weeks later he had bypass surgery.

“He would admit this too,” says Bertelink. “Jeff was cutting back on the exercising. People need to commit to regular and routine fitness. Toward the end of the program, he buried his head in the sand, and sure enough got symptoms.”

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After recovering from the surgery, Hohner started his second round of rehab, this time signing up for the stress management course. He now credits the course for improved sleep and overall balance and calmness.

“I’m grateful for the heart attack because it uncovered that I had a problem, and thankfully I was in good enough shape to withstand it. It got dealt with in the way it did, in a timely manner,” says Hohner. “It could have reared its head at any time because of the family history. And now my children know and they can start early to learn the lessons I’m learning now.” **R**

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