

Adjusting to Life with Your ICD

While the idea of living with an implantable cardioverter defibrillator – or ICD -- might seem scary, the device is designed to save your life. Maria is thankful for hers.

"I joked with my cardiologist one day, I said, 'Well, now I'm strapped with this thing.' And he said, 'It's not so bad.' I said, 'Are you kidding me? There's nothing else I'd rather be strapped with, because this is what's keeping me alive.'" – Maria, Patient

Your ICD works in the background 24 hours a day, monitoring your heart rhythms.

"It can treat a slow heartbeat by pacing the heart or it can treat the fast heartbeat by either pacing the heart out of that rhythm or it can deliver a shock." - Gabriel Breuer, MD Cardiac Electrophysiologist

This shock feels like a swift thump or blow to the chest, but lasts only a second. When your ICD delivers therapy, it's working to correct dangerous heart rhythms.

"If you receive one shock, you need to calm down, sit down, and just notify your provider. However, if you receive two shocks or more within 24 hours, it is recommended that you seek immediate medical attention."
- Gabriel Breuer, MD Cardiac Electrophysiologist

An ICD was implanted into Donald Williams' chest a couple of years ago. As he learned, living with an ICD requires following a few steps. For starters, always carry your ID card, which you'll receive after your device is implanted. The card has information about your heart rhythms and your particular ICD. You might also consider wearing a Medic alert bracelet.

"It is important to tell all your healthcare providers that you have a device, even those who are not involved in your heart care." – Gabriel Breuer, MD Cardiac Electrophysiologist

While most properly maintained consumer appliances such as microwave ovens and electronics pose little or no risk to your ICD, be aware of devices that can cause interference if not handled correctly.

Your cell phone, for example, should be kept away from the ICD. Talk on the phone using the ear opposite the device, and don't keep the phone in a shirt pocket over your ICD.

At airports, even though the walk-through and full-body scanners are considered safe, let a TSA agent know you have an ICD just in case you set off an alarm.

If you're someplace where security uses hand scanners, ask the guard to avoid placing the scanner near your chest any longer than necessary. Avoid placing yourself in situations – such as climbing a ladder or using heavy machinery -- where you could be injured if you become dizzy after receiving a therapeutic shock.

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Your healthcare provider will check your ICD on a regular basis to ensure it's working properly, see how often it's delivered therapy and check battery life.

You may be given a home monitor that can wirelessly record information about your ICD and send it to your health care provider using your home's Internet connection.

"It records your activity while you're sleeping." Donald, Patient

The pulse generator, which contains the battery, can be expected to last up to seven years. When the battery gets weak, the pulse generator needs to be replaced. The lead wires, which run from the pulse generator to your heart, are not usually changed, but just tested to make sure they are working properly.

Beyond physical adjustments, you might experience some emotional difficulty at first. Some people worry about their ICD shocking them and are scared to exercise or engage in other activities they enjoy.

Discuss any concerns such as these with your healthcare provider. Talking to a counselor or joining a support group where you'll meet other people with cardiac implants can also be helpful.

"Gives you a chance to tell your story, gives you a chance to vent." – Donald, Patient

An ICD won't cure heart disease, but combined with a healthy lifestyle and proper care for heart disease, it can help you return to an active life.... as Maria has.

"I know it's intimidating, it's a little scary. Just the scar's scary. Just embrace it. This is going to give you opportunities to do things you like to do. It's gonna give you another lease on life." – Maria, Patient