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Cardiac rehab helps patients build healthier lives

DALTON, Ga. (February 20, 2025) – Velvet Spitler graduated from a cardiac rehab program in January after suffering a near-fatal heart episode while on vacation in July 2024. Initially dismissing her symptoms as heat exhaustion, she later went to see her cardiologist, Vineet Dua, MD. After examining her, he sent her to the Emergency Department for a heart catheterization right away. Ateet Patel, MD, performed the procedure and discovered she had a 100 percent blocked left artery and inserted a stent. Both doctors are part of Vitruvian Health Heart & Vascular.

After receiving the stent, Spitler was amazed by her newfound energy and improved breathing.

But her initial recovery was only the beginning. Spitler, 63, is one of many individuals who enroll in Hamilton Medical Center's Cardiac Rehabilitation Program, located inside Bradley Wellness Center.

Over the course of 12 weeks, participants engage in monitored exercise, heart health education, nutritional counseling and behavioral coaching to promote lasting lifestyle changes. Patients who have experienced heart attacks, bypass surgery, stent placement, congestive heart failure or other cardiovascular conditions are ideal candidates and can participate through a physician's referral. The program's goal is to equip individuals with tools to increase their physical, mental and emotional well-being, empowering them to lead fuller, healthier lives. Most insurance plans cover the program's cost.

Each participant undergoes an initial assessment with a cardiac rehabilitation specialist to tailor an individualized program. Throughout the program, patients take part in supervised exercise sessions, educational classes and safe home exercise planning — all while receiving continuous support from a dedicated team of physicians, a registered nurse, exercise physiologists and a registered dietitian. Upon completing the program, patients are encouraged to continue their progress through the Progressive Rehabilitation Exercise Program (PREP).

At first apprehensive about cardiac rehab, Spitler soon found herself thriving in the program. She is now looking forward to joining PREP and encourages anyone recovering from a heart procedure to take advantage of cardiac rehab.

“It made all the difference,” she said.

For many heart patients, recovery isn’t just about healing from surgeries or procedures — it’s about reclaiming their lives.

At 88 years old, Jo Hughes isn’t slowing down. Following a stent procedure in November 2024, she began the cardiac rehab program and is now close to completing Phase 2. A lifelong walker, Hughes was determined to remain active, even after suffering a neck and shoulder injury in December. The rehab staff carefully tailored her exercises to prevent further injury, allowing her to keep walking.

“My experience was better than I ever imagined it could be,” she said.

Hughes said she was deeply impressed by the care and support she received from “friendly and excellent” staff. She plans to join the PREP program after graduation, continuing her commitment to heart health.

At 71, Jackie Lawson thought his symptoms — shortness of breath, bloating and headaches — were related to his diabetes medication. But after a series of tests, doctors discovered he had multiple blocked arteries, leading to a quadruple bypass surgery. Lawson described his hospital experience as “pleasant,” crediting his smooth recovery to the outstanding communication and care provided by the medical team.

After weeks in cardiac rehab, Lawson and his wife have embraced an active lifestyle, walking four miles several times a week. He praises the cardiac rehab team for their top-notch expertise, saying the information and training he received have been invaluable in his recovery.

For 73-year-old Gail Clark, heart disease came as an emotional blow. A long-time diabetic, she initially felt discouraged when diagnosed with cardiovascular disease. But with each session, Clark saw her physical strength return and her confidence grow.

Although hesitant at first, Clark soon found herself looking forward to each session, appreciating the personal attention and encouragement from the staff. She credits cardiac rehab for giving her the discipline to maintain an exercise routine, now attending PREP three times a week with a goal of increasing to four.

“Only the Lord knows our number of days,” Clark said, “so I focus on improving my quality of life by remaining active.”

For more information on the rehab program, visit bradleywell.com/cardiac-rehab or call 706-272-6574.

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Photo:

Hamilton Cardiac Rehabilitation staff are pictured with patients. On the top, from left, are Megan Stockburger, Debra Dunn, Jo Hughes (patient), Emily Cornelius, James Donaldson, Jackie Lawson (patient), and Trenton Hunter. On the bottom are Emily Cornelius, Velvet Spitler (patient), Trenton Hunter, Debra Dunn, Gail Clark (patient), Tina Haithcock and Keila Elrod.