The road to recovery after a heart attack can be a difficult one.

Greg Merritt, of Brighton, Michigan, was just 46 years old and in seemingly good health when he went into cardiac arrest.

Merritt survived, but he suddenly found himself needing help to heal, physically and emotionally.  He found that help at the University of Michigan's cardiac rehabilitation program.

"The staff here and the other patients allowed me the opportunity to feel like I can really get back to the life I had," Merritt said. "For me, it was as much about the sense of gaining confidence as anything else."

Merritt had been in decent shape before his cardiac arrest, so he was understandably nervous about working out afterward.

That's a very common concern, said Carla Vorndran, an exercise physiologist with the U of M cardiac rehabilitation program.

"After you've had a heart attack or a cardiac arrest, it's really scary," Vorndran said. "If they come into a place like this, they can exercise with a monitor on, they can have someone watching over them, and feel really safe and comfortable with getting back to the exercise."

Cardiac rehab may benefit patients who've suffered a heart attack, had bypass surgery or angioplasty, coronary stents, peripheral arterial disease heart valve disease, a heart transplant or even congestive heart failure.

In addition to receiving a customized exercise program, patients also learn about nutrition and how to reduce stress.  Numerous studies find clear benefits.

"It reduces your risk of death from all causes, whether it's a cardiac cause or anything else," Vorndran said. "Exercise and a program like cardiac rehab can reduce that risk."

According to the American Heart Association, cardiac rehab reduces mortality by over 50 percent compared with those patients who do not participate. It also reduces the likelihood of being readmitted to the hospital by 25 percent.

But the benefits aren't just physical.

Merritt says cardiac rehab can also ease loneliness at what is often a very isolating time for people.

"When you walk into a room, you think, 'I'm the only person that has this problem,' but you get into a room where everyone has this problem, it helps you to feel a little bit more normal and it helps you to recognize that, 'I'm not alone in this,'" said Vorndran.

Merritt was stunned to learn only 30-60 percent of eligible patients are referred to cardiac rehab, and of those, only 20 percent actually enroll.

"If this were the drug of choice, everybody would say, 'I'm gonna take that, because I could live five years longer and have a healthier life,'" Merritt said.

Most insurances will cover cardiac rehab for patients with a major cardiac event.  Coverage generally ranges from anywhere between 80 percent and 100 percent, for 18-36 visits.

"A lot of people are missing out on a really great experience and a really great way to improve their lives," Vorndran said. "It makes me feel like we need to talk about it more, and we need to have physicians talk about it more."

Merritt is now passionate about sharing the benefits of cardiac rehab with patients and the physicians who would refer them.

"I've spend the last couple of years really paying attention to what the research says, and it is unequivical about its benefits. So for me, that means we've got to change and raise awareness because it should be that everyone gets referred," Merritt said. "If you break your leg, people go get physical therapy.  If you break your heart, you should actually go get cardiac rehabilitation."

To learn more about cardiac rehab, [click here](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/CardiacRehab/Cardiac-Rehab_UCM_002079_SubHomePage.jsp).