

Managing Your Heart Failure

What is heart failure?

The term “heart failure” means that your heart does not pump your blood as well as it should. Since your blood carries oxygen, your body may not get all of the oxygen it needs.

What causes heart failure?

Heart failure has many different causes. Sometimes the exact cause can't be found. The most common causes of heart failure are listed below:

- Coronary artery disease (narrowing of the blood vessels to the heart)—often people with heart failure have had a heart attack in the past
- Problems with the heart muscle itself (known as cardiomyopathy)
- High blood pressure (also known as hypertension)
- Problems with any of the heart valves
- Abnormal heart rhythms
- Toxic substances (such as alcohol abuse)

What are the symptoms of heart failure?

Some people with heart failure have few problems or symptoms. The following is a list of problems that people with heart failure might have:

- Shortness of breath (perhaps when walking or climbing stairs)
- Shortness of breath when lying down flat in bed
- Waking up in the night, suddenly breathless
- General tiredness or weakness
- Swelling of the legs (usually, just the feet or ankles)

Will I need to have any special tests to see if I have heart failure?

Your doctor might order the tests listed below:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Electrocardiogram (also called EKG or ECG)
- Chest x-ray
- Echocardiography or radionuclide ventriculography

The last two tests are often used to make sure of the diagnosis. An Echocardiography is a test that causes no pain. A probe is moved across the surface of your chest. It sends out sound waves that allow your doctor to get pictures of your heart. The pictures show your doctor how well your heart is pumping.

Radionuclide ventriculography is a test that uses very low doses of a radioactive substance. This substance is injected into your blood. It travels to the heart and produces pictures that show your doctor how well your heart is pumping. The radioactive substance is safe and leaves your body completely.

What kind of treatment will I need?

Your treatment will include lifestyle changes and medicine. Here are some important things you should talk about with your doctor:

- Diet—you may be told to reduce the amount of salt you eat. Other changes in diet may be advised, depending on other health problems you may have.
- Alcohol—you will be advised to drink less alcohol.
- Exercise—most people with heart failure can still exercise, but your doctor will help you decide how much and what kind of exercise you can do.
- Family support—your family can be a big help to you, so involve them when possible.
- Other sources of support—your doctor can give you information about support groups. It sometimes helps to talk with other people who have similar problems.

What medicines will I need to take?

Many different medicines are used to treat heart failure. You may need one or more medicines, depending on your symptoms and test results. Your doctor will discuss these medicines with you. It may take a while to find the best medicine for you and the best amount of it.

Three kinds of medicines are commonly used to treat heart failure. These are listed below:

- **ACE inhibitors.** ACE inhibitors may help people with heart failure live longer. Usually, they make you feel better too, although often not right away.
- **Diuretics.** Diuretics are often called “water tablets,” because they make you urinate more often and help keep fluid from building up in your body. If you have swelling in your ankles, diuretics should help. They can also decrease fluid that collects in your lungs. This helps to make you less breathless.
- **Digoxin.** Digoxin helps the heart pump better. You might take it if you are still having symptoms even though you’re using the first two medicines. Digoxin also helps if you have certain types of irregular heart beat.

You might need to take other medicines if you have other problems or if you have side effects with any of these medicines.

When you’re taking medicine for heart failure, you’ll need to have blood tests to check your potassium level and kidney function. How often you need blood tests depends on the type and strength of medicine you are taking. Many patients take these medicines without any problems. However, if you have concerns about the medicine or think you may be having side effects, you should talk to your doctor. It’s very important that you take your medicine as prescribed. You should not alter the amount of medicine you are taking without asking your doctor first.

How often will I need to see my doctor?

At first, you may need to be seen as often as every week to check on the effect of the medicine. After your doctor has adjusted your medicine to suit your condition, you may need to be seen less often.

When should I call my doctor?



Weigh yourself each day on bathroom scales when you get up in the morning. You should weigh yourself after urinating, but before you eat breakfast. If you gain 3 to 5 pounds, you should tell your doctor. This weight gain might mean your body is retaining fluid. Your doctor may increase the amount of medicine you take. You should also call your doctor if you are becoming short of breath or see swelling of your ankles or feet.

Many people with heart failure lead active lives. However, you will probably have to make some changes. You should talk to your doctor if you are having problems making these changes. Your doctor can help you.

Where can I get information and support about heart failure?

Some sources of information and help for people with heart failure are listed below:

Sources of information about heart failure

American Heart Association
7272 Greenville Avenue
Dallas, TX 75231-4596
Telephone: 800-AHA-USA1 (800-242-8721)

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
Information Center Public Health Service
P.O. Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105
Telephone: 301-251-1222

AHCPR Publications Clearinghouse
P.O. Box 8547
Silver Spring, MD 20907
Telephone: 800-358-9295
("Living with heart disease: is it heart failure?"
AHCPR publication no. 94-0614)

Sources of information about support groups

The Mended Hearts, Inc.
7272 Greenville Avenue
Dallas, TX 75231-4596
Telephone: 214-706-1442

The Coronary Club, Inc.
9500 Euclid Avenue, EE-37
Cleveland, OH 44195
Telephone: 216-444-3690

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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