

Heart Failure: Medicines That Help Symptoms



You will probably need to take more than one medicine for your symptoms of heart failure. Medicines do not cure heart failure. But if you treat your symptoms, you can feel better, prolong your life, and enjoy it more.

Be sure to take your medicines just as your doctor prescribes. These medicines were chosen to give you the best results with the fewest risks. If you have any problems or questions, talk to your doctor. Do not stop taking your medicines.

This information can help you learn about the medicines used to control symptoms of heart failure and how they work.

Diuretics

When fluid builds up in your body, your legs may swell and you may feel out of breath. Diuretics help rid the body of extra fluid and sodium, so they decrease swelling and help you breathe. They also lower blood pressure.

The three main types of diuretics are:

- **Thiazide diuretics**, such as hydrochlorothiazide and chlorthalidone. These drugs may be used for mild heart

failure but are better at lowering blood pressure than at treating the symptoms of heart failure.

- **Loop diuretics**, such as bumetanide and furosemide. These drugs are most often used for more severe heart failure.
- **Potassium-sparing diuretics**, such as spironolactone. These are sometimes taken with the other types of diuretics. You may need this type of drug if your potassium levels are too low. Spironolactone also blocks the action of a hormone that can make heart failure worse.

You may need to take diuretics 2 to 3 times a week, every other day, once a day, or several times daily. Most come as pills, but some can be given as a shot if you are in the hospital.

It may take some time for your doctor to find the right dose and the best time of day for you to take these medicines. This will depend on your age, your body size, how well your kidneys work, how much fluid buildup you have, and your salt (sodium) intake. Work closely with your doctor to get the best results.

If a high dose of a loop diuretic is not working well, your doctor may prescribe another diuretic called metolazone to take with it. Metolazone can help the loop diuretic work better.

Diuretics are often used with ACE inhibitors, which also lower blood pressure. They may also be combined with other medicines.

Digoxin

Digoxin slows your heart rate and makes contractions stronger. This helps your heart pump more blood with each beat. Digoxin can improve your quality of life and your ability to exercise. It may help you avoid having to stay in the hospital.

Your doctor will probably prescribe digoxin only if you continue to have symptoms after you are already taking other medicines for heart failure.

When you start taking digoxin, you may need to have frequent blood tests. You may have these tests less often after you have been taking digoxin for a while.

Potassium

Potassium is a mineral that helps your body send the electrical signals that cause your heart to beat. Diuretics often cause low levels of potassium. A low potassium level can lead to uneven heartbeats (arrhythmias). If your potassium levels are low, your doctor may want you to take a potassium pill along with your diuretic.

Some people can get enough potassium by eating more foods that have a lot of potassium. Examples include dried fruits (such as raisins, prunes, dates, and figs), fresh fruits (such as oranges, bananas, cantaloupe, and strawberries), and vegetables (such as potatoes, beets, peas, and tomatoes). Some salt substitutes contain potassium chloride and are a source of potassium. Ask your doctor if you can use a salt substitute.

Ask your doctor if you should eat more potassium-rich foods. Do not change your diet unless you talk to your doctor first. Too much potassium can also cause problems.

Other medicines

Your doctor may prescribe other medicines that can help your heart work better or prevent other problems. For example, two types of medicines

are ones that prevent heart rhythm problems (antiarrhythmics) and ones that prevent blood clots (anticoagulants).

Antiarrhythmics

Heart failure can lead to early death. This happens because people with heart failure tend to develop abnormal rapid heart rhythms. These are dangerous because they make it much harder for your heart to pump blood.

Medicines that prevent heart rhythm problems are called antiarrhythmics.

Anticoagulants

If your heart is not working well, you may be at risk for developing a blood clot inside your heart. Blood clots in the heart increase your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. You may need to take a "blood thinner," or anticoagulant, such as warfarin to prevent blood clots. If you take these medicines, you will need regular blood tests to see how they are working.

Questions to ask your doctor

Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

Questions about medicines for symptoms of heart failure: