

Heart Failure: Living With the Disease



Heart failure occurs when your heart does not pump as much blood as your body needs. Failure does not mean that the heart has stopped pumping but rather that it is not pumping as well as it should.

Over time, this causes fluid buildup in your lungs and other parts of your body. Fluid buildup can cause shortness of breath, fatigue, swollen ankles, and other problems. There are many things you can do to take care of yourself at home. Take your medicines as your doctor tells you. Limit sodium (salt) in your diet, and check your weight every day.

It is important to learn to manage your heart failure. If you closely follow your doctor's treatment plan, you can feel better and live longer.

Take your medicines as directed

For your safety:

- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Do not stop or change your medicines without talking to your doctor first. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

- Do not take any vitamins, over-the-counter drugs, or herbal products unless you talk to your doctor first.
- Do not use nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as aspirin, ibuprofen, or naproxen, unless you talk to your doctor first. These drugs may make your heart failure worse.

Your treatment may include some of the following medicines:

- Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors can slow how heart failure progresses. They reduce the heart's workload, lower blood pressure, and reduce swelling.
- Angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs) work like ACE inhibitors. Your doctor may prescribe them instead of or along with ACE inhibitors.
- Diuretics, also called water pills, reduce swelling. Some (like spironolactone) block the effects of harmful substances that can make your heart failure worse.
- Digoxin reduces symptoms for some people who have heart failure.
- Beta-blockers can slow your heart rate and lower your blood pressure. They can also slow down the process of heart failure.
- Potassium supplements replace this important mineral that your body sometimes loses when you take diuretics.

Keep track of your symptoms

Keep a daily record of your symptoms. Write down any changes in how you feel, such as new or increased shortness of breath. Also record if your ankles are more swollen than usual and if you have to urinate in the night more often. Note anything that you ate or did that could have triggered these changes. Take your list of

symptoms with you to the doctor. Learn what signs may mean that your heart failure is getting worse. And know when to call your doctor or call for emergency help.

Check your weight every day

Weigh yourself at the same time each day, using the same scale. Do not wear shoes. Wear the same thing each time you weigh yourself, or wear nothing at all. Record your weight. Call your doctor if you notice a sudden weight gain. In general, call if you gain 3 pounds or more in 2 to 3 days. Your doctor can tell you how much weight gain is okay. A sudden weight gain may mean that your heart failure is getting worse.

Reduce sodium

Sodium causes your body to hold on to water, making it harder for your heart to pump. People get most of their sodium from salt in foods.

- Take the salt shaker off your table. Do not add salt when you cook. Slowly reducing salt will help you adjust to the taste.
- Read food labels on cans and food packages. They tell you how much sodium you get in one serving. Check the serving size. If you eat more than one serving, you are getting more sodium.

- Be aware that sodium can come in forms other than salt, including monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium citrate, and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda). MSG is often added to Asian food. You can sometimes ask for food without MSG or salt.
- Use fresh or frozen ingredients instead of canned ones whenever you can. Choose low-sodium canned goods.
- Eat fewer processed foods and foods from restaurants, including fast foods.

If you have problems with self-care

It may be hard to deal with having heart failure. You may have trouble affording your medicines. You may have side effects from your medicines or trouble taking many different medicines for other health problems. Changing how you eat and cutting back on sodium may not be easy. Do not try to handle your problems on your own. Talk with your doctor if you are having problems managing your heart failure.

For more support, contact the American Heart Association at 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721) or www.americanheart.org.