

Heart Failure: Making Lifestyle Changes



Taking an active role in your treatment can strongly affect how you feel. Lifestyle changes can help you feel better and improve your health so that you can enjoy life. Get enough rest, eat healthy, and get regular exercise. These are key to controlling your symptoms and preventing sudden heart failure.

Stop smoking

If you smoke, quit. It may be the most important step you can take to protect your heart. Avoid secondhand smoke too. Stop-smoking programs, medicines, and counseling boost your chances of quitting for good.

Exercise and know your weight

Moderate, regular physical activity is very good for your heart. It improves your blood flow and helps control your weight. However, too much exercise can stress your heart and cause a heart failure flare-up.

- Start with light exercise if your doctor says it is okay. Even if you can only do a small amount, exercise will help you get stronger and have more energy. It helps manage your weight and your stress. Walking is an easy

way to get exercise. Walk a little more each day if you can. Aim for at least 2½ hours of moderate activity a week.

- When you exercise, watch for signs that your heart is working too hard. You are pushing yourself too hard if you cannot talk while you are exercising. If you feel you are pushing yourself too hard, stop, sit down, and rest.
- If you feel "wiped out" the day after you exercise, walk slower or for a shorter distance until you can work up to a better pace.
- Get enough rest at night. Sleeping with 1 or 2 pillows under your upper body and head may help you breathe easier.

Weigh yourself without clothing at the same time each day. And record your weight. Call your doctor if you notice a sudden weight gain. He or she may tell you how much weight to watch for and how much weight gain is okay. A sudden weight gain may mean your heart failure is getting worse.

Limit alcohol

Avoid too much alcohol. Heavy use of alcohol raises the risk for many health problems. Limit alcohol intake to 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink a day for women.

Eat in a heart-healthy way

Making good food choices can have a big impact on your health. The focus of a heart-healthy diet is to add more healthy foods to your diet and cut back on foods that are not so good for you. To have a heart-healthy diet:

- Eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and other high-fiber foods.
- Choose foods that are low in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol.
- Limit salt (sodium).

- Eat more foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, such as fish.
- Limit drinks and foods with added sugar.

Avoid getting sick

Avoid getting sick from colds and the flu. Ask your doctor for a pneumococcal shot. Get a flu vaccine each year, as soon as it's available. And ask those you live or work with to do the same, so they do not get the flu and infect you. Wash your hands often, especially when you are around people who are sick. If you do get sick, check with your doctor before taking over-the-counter cold medicines.

Talk with your doctor

Talk with your doctor if you are having trouble making these lifestyle changes. Your doctor may suggest other ways to make changes and refer you to other people who can help.

Limit your stress

Stress is a normal, even necessary, part of life. But too much stress can affect your health. You can reduce stress by understanding what you can control and what you cannot and learning skills to manage it. Tell others about your feelings.

Being as active as possible helps. Muscle relaxation exercises, massage, aromatherapy, yoga, and other therapies may help. Try meditation and listening to relaxing music.

Questions about lifestyle changes for heart failure:

You may want to ask your doctor these questions:

- How much can I exercise?
- How much alcohol is safe for me?
- Should I limit how much caffeine I get?
- How much sodium is safe for me?
- Do I need a pneumococcal shot or flu vaccine?
- What weight should I try to maintain?

Use the space below to list any other questions or concerns.