



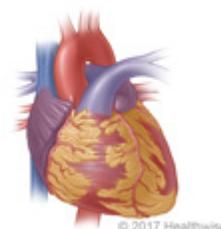
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## Heart Failure

### Topic Overview

#### What is heart failure?

Heart failure means that your heart muscle doesn't pump as much blood as your body needs. Failure doesn't mean that your heart has stopped. It means that your heart is not pumping as well as it should.



Because your heart cannot pump well, your body tries to make up for it. To do this:

- Your body holds on to salt and water. This increases the amount of blood in your bloodstream.
- Your heart beats faster.
- Your heart may get bigger.

Your body has an amazing ability to make up for heart failure. It may do such a good job that you don't know you have a disease. But at some point, your heart and body will no longer be able to keep up. Then fluid starts to build up in your body, and you have symptoms like feeling weak and out of breath.

This fluid buildup is called congestion. It's why some doctors call the disease congestive heart failure.

Heart failure usually gets worse over time. But treatment can slow the disease and help you feel better and live longer.

#### What causes heart failure?

Anything that damages your heart or affects how well it pumps can lead to heart failure. Common causes of heart failure are:

- High blood pressure.
- Heart attack.
- Coronary artery disease.

Other conditions that can lead to heart failure include:

- Diabetes.
- Diseases of the heart muscle (cardiomyopathies).
- Heart valve disease.
- Disease of the sac around the heart (pericardial disease), such as pericarditis.
- A slow, fast, or uneven heart rhythm (arrhythmia).
- A heart problem that you were born with (congenital heart defect).
- Long-term heavy alcohol use, which can damage your heart.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of heart failure start to happen when your heart cannot pump enough blood to the rest of your body. In the early stages, you may:

- **Feel tired** easily.
- **Be short of breath** when you exert yourself.
- **Feel like your heart is pounding** or racing (palpitations).
- **Feel weak** or dizzy.

As heart failure gets worse, fluid starts to build up in your lungs and other parts of your body. This may cause you to:

- **Feel short of breath** even at rest.
- **Have swelling** (edema), especially in your legs, ankles, and feet.
- **Gain weight**. This may happen over just a day or two, or more slowly.
- **Cough or wheeze**, especially when you lie down.
- **Feel bloated** or sick to your stomach.

If your symptoms suddenly get worse, you will need emergency care.

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## How is heart failure diagnosed?

Your doctor may diagnose heart failure based on your symptoms and a physical examination. But you will need tests to find the cause and type of heart failure so that you can get the right treatment. These tests may include:

- Blood tests.
- A chest X-ray.
- An electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG) to check your heart's electrical system.
- An echocardiogram to see the size and shape of your heart and how well it is pumping.
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to see the structure of your heart and check how well it is pumping.

### Echocardiogram

An echocardiogram can help show if you have heart failure, what type it is, and what is causing it. Your doctor can also use it to see if your heart failure is getting worse.

This test can measure how much blood your heart pumps to your body. This measurement is called the ejection fraction. If your ejection fraction gets lower and you are having more symptoms, it means that your heart failure is getting worse. More blood is backing up in your heart and not being pumped out to the rest of your body.

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## How is it treated?

Most people with heart failure need to take several medicines. Your doctor may prescribe medicines to:

- **Help keep heart failure from getting worse**. These drugs include ACE inhibitors, angiotensin II receptor blockers (ARBs), beta-blockers, and vasodilators like hydralazine and a nitrate.
- **Reduce symptoms** so you feel better. These drugs include diuretics (water pills) and digoxin.
- **Treat the cause** of your heart failure.

It is very important to take your medicines exactly as your doctor tells you to. If you don't, your heart failure could get worse.

### Pacemaker or defibrillator

A pacemaker or a defibrillator (such as an ICD) may be an option for you if you have a problem with your heart rhythm. A pacemaker can help your heart pump blood better. A defibrillator can prevent a dangerous heart-rhythm problem.

### Care at home

Lifestyle changes are an important part of treatment. They can help slow down heart failure. They may also help control other diseases that make heart failure worse, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and coronary artery disease.

The best steps you can take are to:

- **Eat less sodium.** Sodium causes your body to hold on to water and may make symptoms worse. Your doctor may also ask you to limit how much fluid you drink.
- **Get regular exercise.** Your doctor can tell you what level of exercise is safe for you, how to check your pulse, and how to know if you are doing too much.
- **Take rest breaks** during the day.
- **Lose weight** if you are overweight. Even a few kilograms can make a difference.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking damages your heart and makes exercise harder to do.
- **Limit alcohol.** Ask your doctor how much, if any, is safe.

Ask your doctor if [cardiac rehab](#) is right for you. Rehab can give you education and support that help you learn self-care and build new healthy habits, such as exercise and healthy eating.

To stay as healthy as possible, work closely with your doctor. Have all your tests, and go to all your appointments. It is also important to:

- Talk to your doctor before you take any new medicine, including non-prescription and prescription drugs, vitamins, and herbs. Some of them may make your heart failure worse.
- Keep track of your symptoms. Weigh yourself at the same time every day, and write down your weight. Call your doctor if you have a sudden weight gain, a change in your ability to exercise, or any sudden change in your symptoms.

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## What can you expect if you have heart failure?

Medicines and lifestyle changes can slow or even reverse heart failure for some people. But heart failure often gets worse over time.

Early on, your symptoms may not be too bad. As heart failure gets worse, you may need to limit your activities. Treatment can often help reduce symptoms, but it usually doesn't get rid of them.

Heart failure can also lead to other health problems. These may include:

- Trouble with your heart rhythm (arrhythmia).
- Stroke.
- Heart attack.
- Mitral valve regurgitation.
- Blood clots in your legs (deep vein thrombosis) or lungs (pulmonary embolism).

Your doctor may be able to give you medicine or other treatment to prevent or treat these problems.

Heart failure can get worse suddenly. If this happens, you will need emergency care. To prevent [sudden heart failure](#), you need to avoid things that can trigger it. These include eating too much salt, missing a dose of your medicine, and exercising too hard.

Knowing that your health may get worse can be hard. It is normal to sometimes feel sad or hopeless. But if these feelings last, talk to your doctor. Antidepressant medicines, counselling, or both may help you cope.

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## **⚠ Is it an emergency?**

If you or someone in your care has chest pains, difficulty breathing, or severe bleeding, it could be a **life-threatening emergency**. Call **9-1-1** or the local emergency number immediately.

If you are concerned about a possible poisoning or exposure to a toxic substance, call **Poison Control** now at **1-800-567-8911**.