



Congestive Heart Failure

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Congestive Heart Failure

What Is Congestive Heart Failure?

Congestive heart failure happens when the heart becomes too weak to pump enough blood to meet the needs of the body. Blood that should be pumped out of the heart backs up into the lungs and other parts of the body, causing shortness of breath or swelling in the feet and legs. Heart failure can range from mild to severe.

Congestive heart failure does not mean that the heart has stopped working.

What Causes Congestive Heart Failure?

Congestive heart failure usually happens because of other heart problems such as a heart attack (myocardial infarction), high blood pressure, disease of the heart valves or a birth defect. It can also be caused by a medical condition called cardiomyopathy. With this condition, the heart muscle is weakened because of a viral infection or excessive alcohol consumption.

How May I Feel?

If you develop congestive heart failure you may have some or all of these symptoms:

- ♥ Difficulty breathing when you are active or resting
- ♥ You feel tired from hardly any effort
- ♥ You suddenly gain weight (2 to 5 lbs. or more in 1 to 2 days)
- ♥ Your lower limbs (legs and ankles) swell
- ♥ You have swelling or pain in your abdomen (stomach area)
- ♥ You have trouble sleeping unless you are propped up on 2 or more pillows
- ♥ You have a frequent, dry, hacking cough (common when lying down)
- ♥ You lose your appetite



How Is Congestive Heart Failure Treated?

Your symptoms can usually be controlled with medications, rest and diet. When symptoms of heart failure are found early and treatment is started right away, a person can lead a more normal life. The most common treatments are:

- ♥ Daily weight check
- ♥ Reduce salt intake
- ♥ Abstain from alcohol
- ♥ Limit fluids
- ♥ Exercise
- ♥ Rest
- ♥ Medications

Each of these treatments is discussed below.

Check Your Weight Daily

If you gain weight suddenly it is a sign that your kidneys are holding salt and water in your body. You could be holding extra water if you find that, for no reason, your shoes, belt or rings feel tight.

- ♥ Weigh yourself first thing every morning after urinating and before eating.
- ♥ Record your weight on a calendar or in a book. If you gain 2 to 5 lbs. in 1 to 2 days and you have been eating normally, it is likely due to fluid rather than real weight gain.
- ♥ Call your doctor for directions on how to get rid of the extra fluid before your symptoms get worse.

Eat Less Sodium

Sodium is an important substance that helps your body balance fluid levels inside and outside of the cells. But eating too much sodium makes your heart work harder. Sodium attracts water and makes the body hold fluid. The heart has to work harder to pump the added fluid.

Table salt is our most common source of sodium. People with heart failure should limit their sodium to no more than 2,000 mg a day. This is equal to 1 teaspoon of salt a day.

- ♥ Reduce the salt you eat by adding less salt to your food during preparation or after cooking.
- ♥ Avoid canned or prepared foods

Tips To Reduce Your Salt Intake

- ♥ Do not add any salt to your food from the shaker
- ♥ Instead of adding salt when cooking, try other herbs and spices
- ♥ Limit snack, convenience and processed foods
- ♥ Use salt substitutes only if approved by your doctor
- ♥ Read food labels carefully:
 - If salt or sodium is listed as one of the first three ingredients, try another product.
 - Check for ingredients that contain the word sodium such as sodium sulphite, sodium benzoate, monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium propionate, sodium bicarbonate and others. **These are still sodium.**
- ♥ When you eat out look for restaurants that offer low sodium food. Fast food restaurants are not good choices because most of the food has sodium in it.
- ♥ Talk to a dietician about which foods contain salt

Abstain from Alcohol

Alcohol makes it difficult for the heart to pump. To prevent your heart failure from getting worse, you must stop drinking. Ask your health care team for information to help you with this.



Limit your Fluids

Many people with congestive heart failure have trouble because their body holds too much fluid. Your doctor may order diuretic medications (water pills) to help get rid of this extra fluid.

The water pills may make you feel thirsty. But this does not mean that your body needs more fluid. You do not need to replace the fluid that the diuretics have helped your body get rid of.

Most doctors suggest that people with heart failure do not drink more than 1.5 litres or 6 cups of fluid per day. This amount includes fluids you take with your medicines. Fluids include drinks like water, coffee, tea, soup, and juice.

If you feel thirsty, try sucking on small amounts of hard candy to help with a dry mouth. If you are diabetic, make sure these are sugar-free candies.

Exercise

Regular physical activity can give you more energy and improve your symptoms. Talk to your cardiologist about which exercise program is best for you. **Do not exercise immediately following a meal.**

Rest

Plan rest times throughout the day. Your heart pumps more easily during rest times. It may help to take a nap after lunch or put your feet up for a few minutes every couple of hours.

Medications

Please take the medications prescribed for you. They help to make your heart work better. Four types of medications are used to treat heart failure. You may be prescribed one or more of the following:

Medication	The Way it Works
Vasodilators/ ACE inhibitors/ Angiotension Receptor Blockers (ARB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Lowers blood pressure by relaxing the blood vessels (arteries and veins). ♥ When the arteries are relaxed, there is less strain on the heart and it can pump out the blood more easily. ♥ When the veins are relaxed, less blood returns to the heart for pumping. ♥ If you feel weak or dizzy when taking one of these medicines, talk with your doctor. ♥ One type of ACE inhibitors slows down or reverses damage to the heart muscle. This helps to make the heart pump better.
Digoxin (Lanoxin)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Strengthens the heart muscle so that more blood is pumped with each heartbeat.
Diuretic (water pill)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Helps your kidneys make more urine to get rid of excess fluid held in the body when you have congestive heart failure.
Potassium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Helps to control your heart rhythm. Diuretics cause you to lose potassium through your urine and extra potassium is often needed. ♥ Leg cramps are common when your potassium level is too low.
Beta Blocker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Helps to slow down or reverse damage to the heart muscle. This helps the heart to pump better.
Spironolactone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♥ Is a diuretic. It helps to decrease symptoms of heart failure and helps the heart to pump better.

Please see the section called “[Cardiac Medications](#)” in this book for more details about the medications listed in the table above.



When Should I Call My Doctor?

If you notice one or more of the changes listed below, contact your doctor:

- ♥ It becomes harder to breath during ordinary activities such as walking or climbing the stairs.
- ♥ It is hard to breath when lying flat in bed: For example, you need extra pillows or have to sleep in a chair.
- ♥ You wake at night having difficulty breathing.
- ♥ You gain 5 lbs. (2.3 kg) or more in 1 week.
- ♥ You gain 3 lbs. (1.3 kg) or more per week over 2 weeks.
- ♥ You have nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.
- ♥ You have a cough that doesn't go away.
- ♥ You feel very tired.
- ♥ You feel dizzy after taking your medicines.
- ♥ You legs and ankles become more swollen.
- ♥ You feel pain or fullness in the abdomen (stomach area).