

# HEART FAILURE – THE BASICS

## WHAT IS HEART FAILURE?

Heart failure (HF) occurs when the muscle in your heart becomes weak or damaged, and the heart doesn't pump as much blood and oxygen as your body needs. Signs and symptoms of heart failure depend on which part of the heart is affected. Heart failure usually gets worse over time, but there are medications that may slow the progression of this condition.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HEART FAILURE?

Sign or Symptom of Heart Failure	What a person with heart failure may experience	Why it occurs
Shortness of breath (dyspnea)	Feeling breathless at rest or with activity; can occur suddenly when lying down forcing person to sit up, or sleep propped up on pillows	Blood backs up in the lungs due to a weak heart pump, causing fluid to leak into the lungs.
Cough or wheeze	Cough with whitish phlegm; noisy breathing	Fluid builds up in the lungs.
Fluid build-up in the legs and/or abdomen (edema) Weight gain	Swelling of feet, lower legs or abdomen; weight gain	A weak heart pump causes pressure build up in the veins taking blood back to the heart, and fluid leaks into tissues of the body. The kidneys cannot get rid of the extra water and salt.
Fatigue	Feeling tired all day with less energy for activities such as walking, climbing stairs, washing and carrying objects	The weakened heart can no longer pump enough blood and oxygen to all parts of the body, and cannot increase the blood flow to muscles required when exercising.
Increased heart rate	Racing heart, palpitations	Because the heart is weaker, it beats faster to get more blood to other parts of the body.
Reduced appetite or nausea	Feeling full or uncomfortable after eating	Less blood is pumped to the stomach

## HOW CAN I HELP TREAT MY HEART FAILURE?

### Take your medications as prescribed:

- Taking your medications properly is important. Missing even one dose can increase heart failure symptoms, so be sure to get refills before your run out. If you are concerned that your medications are causing side effects, talk with your doctor, nurse practitioner or pharmacist before stopping them.
- It is also very important to take your medications for any other medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, atrial fibrillation, thyroid problems, and sleep apnea. If any of these conditions are not adequately treated, your heart failure may get worse. Talk with your healthcare provider before taking any new medication or supplements.
- Do not take any supplements, pain or cough/cold medications without first checking with a pharmacist or your healthcare provider.

### Monitor your symptoms:

- Weighing yourself every day is an important way to determine if your heart failure is getting worse. An increase in body weight may be a sign that your body is retaining too much fluid. Weigh yourself at approximately the same time each day, using the same scale; the best time is the morning after you go to the bathroom and before you eat or drink anything. An increase in weight of more than 2 lbs or 1 kg in one day suggests worsening heart failure.

### Limit your sodium (salt) intake:

- Limiting salt prevents your body from retaining too much fluid, making your heart work harder. Generally you should avoid or reduce eating processed foods, salty snacks and adding extra salt to your food. Ask your doctor or healthcare provider for more information about a low sodium diet.

### Limit alcohol intake.

- Alcohol can affect the pumping action of heart muscle and electrical pathways in the heart.

### Try to exercise regularly.

- Exercise makes your heart stronger and can help reduce heart failure symptoms. Walking is a great way to get exercise – start slowly. Ask your healthcare provider about attending a cardiac rehabilitation exercise program. Trying to lose weight is also important for heart failure.

If you smoke, try to **quit smoking**

## WHAT CAN MAKE MY HEART FAILURE WORSE?

- Not taking **medications** as prescribed.
- Using medications and supplements which may **interact** with your heart medications
- Extra **salt** intake (this is often due to a change from your usual diet such as new snacks, canned/processed foods, eating out)
- Extra **alcohol** intake
- **Chest infections**, including a chest cold or influenza
- A **heart attack** or abnormal heart rhythm such as atrial fibrillation
- Poorly controlled **high blood pressure**
- Untreated **sleep apnea**
- High **blood sugars**