



living with heart failure

Your nurse: contact

For more urgent attention or out-of-hours help, contact your general practitioner (GP).

How can this leaflet help?

Your doctor has diagnosed that you have heart failure. This leaflet is designed to help you understand more about it. Effective treatment of heart failure will help you keep it under control and help you feel better.

You may be feeling worried or afraid, and perhaps you have not taken in everything you have been told. These feelings are normal and are part of coming to terms with what is happening to you. This information will answer some of your questions. You should share it with your family so they can also understand your heart failure.

It is important to work with your doctor and nurse to make decisions that you are happy with. This information will allow you to discuss any changes needed in your lifestyle and set realistic targets. Read this information carefully and ask the doctors or nursing staff to explain anything you don't understand.

How the heart works

The heart is a muscular organ which pumps blood, enriched with oxygen and nutrients, around the body. In fact it is really two pumps that work side by side:

- ♥ The right side receives blood from the body and pumps it to the lungs where the blood is filled with oxygen.

- ♥ The left side receives blood, rich with oxygen, from the lungs and pumps it back around the body to the muscles and organs.

What is heart failure?

Heart failure is a common heart problem. The term heart failure sounds alarming, but it is simply a technical term for a weak heart muscle. This means that your heart cannot pump as well as it used to. It makes the heart less efficient at circulating oxygen and nutrients to muscles and organs and returning waste products to the kidneys and lungs.

Heart failure is not the same as a heart attack, although it can develop as a result of a heart attack. Because your heart is less efficient you may feel more tired and breathless. Fluid can sometimes build up in your body. This is why you may get swollen ankles, feet and legs. If water begins to collect in your lungs, you will feel even more short of breath.

What causes heart failure?

Heart failure may be caused by damage to the heart muscle. This is most commonly due to:

- ♥ Heart attack
- ♥ Angina
- ♥ High blood pressure
- ♥ Faulty heart valves
- ♥ A viral infection of the heart muscle
- ♥ Drinking too much alcohol
- ♥ Heart rhythm disorder
- ♥ An unknown cause

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What are the symptoms?

♥ **Shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or a cough** are all common symptoms of heart failure and are due to fluid collecting in the lungs. The breathlessness is often more noticeable when you are exercising or lying down. You may also have an irritating cough. Heart failure can lead to you waking up at night, and you may need to get out of bed before you feel better.

Not all breathlessness is due to heart failure however. It is normal to be breathless when you do physical exercise. However, excessive breathlessness, when compared to your friends of the same age, is a cause of concern. Breathlessness is also common in smokers and people with breathing conditions. Overweight people may become very breathless when they do exercise.

♥ **Tiredness and weakness** during exercise or when you do activities such as housework. This is partly due to reduced blood flow to the exercising muscles.

♥ **A swollen stomach and swollen feet, ankles and legs** are other signs of fluid building up in your body. This is due to gravity and the effort it takes for the heart to pump your blood up from your feet.

Not all swollen ankles are due to heart failure however. Overweight people are prone to swollen ankles without having heart failure. Other conditions, such as varicose veins, are also common cause of swollen ankles. Healthy people can suffer from swollen ankles if they have not moved for a long time, for example, on a long journey.

♥ **You will gain weight** as your body retains extra fluid and this is due to your heart not pumping efficiently. Sometimes this weight gain can happen rapidly, for example, up to

2 or 3 pounds (one kilogram) in two days or 5 to 6 pounds (two to three kilograms) in a week. In other cases, slow progressive weight gain, which is not caused by overeating, may be a sign that your heart failure is not fully controlled.

Weigh yourself regularly. You should do this after going to the toilet but before eating. Gaining weight may mean that fluid is building up in your body.

How is heart failure diagnosed?

When a patient describes these symptoms to a doctor, they may suspect heart failure. A careful examination of the heart and lungs will confirm the diagnosis but a number of tests are also needed.

- ♥ A chest x-ray is useful to confirm the diagnosis and work out how much fluid has built up in the lungs.
- ♥ An electrocardiogram (ECG) will be able to confirm signs of a heart attack or rhythm change.
- ♥ An ultrasound scan or echocardiogram is the most useful test used to assess the pumping action of the heart. This is a painless test that provides screen and video pictures of the heart working. It allows the doctor to assess your heart's performance.

How is heart failure treated?

Some conditions that lead to heart failure can be cured, such as anaemia, heart-rhythm disorders or an overactive thyroid. Similarly, certain valve diseases can be corrected by an operation.

In most cases, however, heart failure is the result of a weakened pump function of the heart. This is a life-long condition but symptoms can be successfully treated with medication and your life can be improved with the appropriate lifestyle changes and treatment.

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Many drugs can be used to treat heart failure. If you are taking such drugs, your doctor will discuss them with you individually and your healthcare professional will give you leaflets explaining how they work.

Things to remember about taking your medicine:

- ♥ You should take your tablets every day. They are essential to treat your heart failure.
- ♥ Take your tablets regularly. Never skip a dose, even if you feel better
- ♥ Depending on your symptoms, you may be prescribed one or more medicines. This may be altered when you are reviewed.
- ♥ Always keep a note of what tablets you are currently taking.
- ♥ Make sure you never run out of your tablets
- ♥ Keep taking your tablets until your doctor agrees that you can stop.
- ♥ Do not take 'over the counter medicines' without telling the pharmacist about the medicines you are taking – they may affect how your medicines work.

Surgery for heart failure

Heart failure is not usually treated with surgery. But if it is appropriate in your case, the consultant will discuss with you.

What you can do for yourself

A few simple lifestyle changes can really make a difference.

1) Stop smoking

Your doctor has probably already told you to stop smoking and congratulations if you have. However, you may need extra help if you are still finding it difficult to stop.

Why should you stop smoking when you have heart failure?

Smoking harms both your heart and lungs. If you have heart failure, smoking puts added pressure on your weak heart. Smoking releases the following poisons which affect your heart.

- ♥ **Nicotine** is a poison in your body and causes your heart rate and blood pressure to increase.
- ♥ **Carbon monoxide** competes with the cells in your bloodstream that carry oxygen. This reduces the amount of oxygen that your blood can carry.
- ♥ **Tar** is deposited in your lungs and makes it more difficult for your lungs to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide.

We know it is not easy to stop smoking but you must stop now and forever. If you need help or advice, please ask the staff or you can contact

- ♥ SMOKELINE on 0800 84 84 84 or
- ♥ FAGENDS on 0800 195 2131
web: www.roycastle.org

2) Reduce your salt intake

Too much salt in your diet can make your heart failure worse. We need a certain balance of salt (sodium) and water in our body. However, too much salt or too much water can upset the balance. If you have heart failure it is important that you take less salt because it encourages your body to keep more water.

You should cut down on your salt intake. Always taste food before you add any salt and try never to add salt at the table. You can try using herbs, spices, pepper, mustard or lemon instead.

Many foods contain a lot of salt and you should avoid them. These foods include the following:

- ♥ Processed meats, such as salami or bacon
- ♥ Canned soup and vegetables
- ♥ Tomato sauce and juice
- ♥ Most 'fast foods'
- ♥ Chinese foods
- ♥ Some fish and cheese
- ♥ Crisps and salted peanuts
- ♥ Bovril, beef tea and Oxo

Lo salt or salt substitutes are not recommended because they may affect your medication.

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3) Drink fluid

Unless your consultant has specifically asked you to drink less fluid, you should try to drink between three and four pints of fluid each day. Drink more if the weather is very warm.

4) Reduce the amount of alcohol you drink

If you drink more than the recommended number of units of alcohol it acts as a poison to the heart. Too much alcohol has been shown to cause heart failure. If this is the case for you, you must stop drinking alcohol altogether. Even if other things are causing your heart failure, alcohol can make your condition worse so you should not drink more than one or two units each day.

One unit of alcohol is:

- ♥ A small glass of wine.
- ♥ Half a pint of 'normal-strength' beer; or
- ♥ A single pub measure of spirit, such as rum or gin.

Remember if you drink pints you are also taking in a lot of fluid and this may put an added strain on your heart.

5) Watch you weight

Being overweight means that your heart has to work harder. So if you are overweight, you should ask for advice about losing weight. It is important to monitor your weight because this will show whether your body is retaining fluid. Weigh yourself regularly in the morning, after you have been to the toilet and before getting dressed, and keep a record of this. Your doctor or nurse will show you how to take and record your weight if you need help to do this.

Remember!

If your weight increases over a number of days, this may mean that you are retaining fluid. If you experience an unexplained weight gain of 2 to 3 pounds (one kilogram) or more in two days,

you should report this to your doctor or nurse so they can treat you promptly to avoid deterioration in your condition.

6) Keep yourself active

To begin with, your doctor or nurse will tell you to reduce your activity. But, as your medication begins to take effect, you will be encouraged to be more active.

At home it is important to keep as active as possible and keep doing normal activities. By staying active you will find that you feel generally stronger and able to do more things.

Many people with heart failure actually say that they feel better when they exercise regularly, for example, walking, cycling, swimming, dancing and bowling. This is because it gives you stamina, makes you supple and strengthens the body. It also makes you feel better psychologically and can help you socialise.

The aim is that you should always be able to talk during any form of exercise. If you are getting very breathless you need to slow down.

Remember these important dos and don'ts when you are exercising

- ♥ Do start by warming up, for example gentle walking
- ♥ Don't exercise after a meal
- ♥ Do work at your own speed
- ♥ Don't exercise in extremely hot or extremely cold temperatures
- ♥ Do wear sensible footwear
- ♥ Don't exercise if you are feeling unwell. Stop immediately if you become unwell
- ♥ Do some cool-down exercise when you have finished, for example gentle stretches.

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7) Do enjoy yourself

Relax more. Relaxation includes activities that allow you to release physical and mental tension. This can be in the form of leisure activities, for example, having a hobby, walking, watching television or joining a relaxation class. It is really up to you to find something you enjoy.

Relaxation:

- ♥ Gives you more energy
- ♥ Reduces physical aches and pains
- ♥ Promotes sleep
- ♥ Improves self-confidence

8) Make sure you are immunised

People with heart failure can become unwell very quickly with flu (influenza) and this can develop into pneumonia which is a more serious infection. You should discuss this with your GP each autumn, and ask if you can be immunised each year with the flu jab. Ask your GP too about whether you need the pneumonia vaccination.

9) Sexual relationships

Many people with heart failure can continue to make love without any problems. However, you and your partner may want to find less physically demanding ways of sharing your affection. You can get more advice from your doctor or nurse.

When to seek professional advice

Get in touch with your doctor or nurse if you experience any of the following:

- ♥ Sudden weight gain of more than 3 pounds (one kilogram) in two days.
- ♥ Weight gain of more than 5 to 6 pounds (two to three kilograms) in one week.
- ♥ Increased shortness of breath.
- ♥ Increased swellings in the legs or stomach.
- ♥ A cough that does not go away.
- ♥ Any side effects from your medication.

Your GP or nurse can treat you at home for problems, but if they are not treated you may have to go into hospital. So, if you are feeling worse **do not be afraid to ask your GP or nurse for help. The number for your nurse can be found on the front page.**

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Your medicines

Drug name	Dose	Times a day	Action	Comments

Your weight

Date	Weight	Date	Weight

Your test

Date:	Sodium:
Blood pressure:	Potassium:
Pulse:	Urea:
Weight:	
Date:	Sodium:
Blood pressure:	Potassium:
Pulse:	Urea:
Weight:	

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Your test

Date:	Sodium:
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Date:	Sodium:
Blood pressure:	Potassium:
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Weight:	
Date:	Sodium:
Blood pressure:	Potassium:
Pulse:	Urea:
Weight:	

Any notes/phone numbers:

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Expert Patient programme:

There is a free self management programme for people living with long term health conditions. For more information, or to attend a course, please ring:

- ♥ Liverpool (0151) 549 1706
- ♥ Sefton (01704) 885 340
- ♥ Knowsley (0151) 443 4441

NHS Direct: 0845 46 47

For free advice and information on any health matter, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

This leaflet is available in other formats on request.