

Heart Failure



There are many steps you can take to feel better and improve your health if you have heart failure. Medicine and lifestyle changes can slow heart failure in some people.

Learning all you can about your condition can help you get the best results from your treatment.

What is heart failure and what causes it?

Heart failure occurs when your heart does not pump as much blood as your body needs. Failure does not mean that the heart has stopped pumping. It means it is not pumping as well as it should.

Anything that damages the heart and its ability to pump can lead to heart failure. This includes coronary artery disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, and heart valve problems.

You may not know you have heart failure until you have had it for years. This is because your heart can make up for not being able to pump well by getting bigger and beating faster. But it can only do this to a certain point.

In time, your heart gets worn out. You have symptoms, such as feeling weak, lightheaded, and very tired. Fluid builds up in your lungs and other parts of your body. This causes you to be short of breath and have swelling in your body.

What are the types of heart failure?

Ask your doctor what type of heart failure you have. Most people get heart failure because of a problem with the heart's left lower chamber (ventricle). During the resting phase of your heartbeat, the left ventricle fills with oxygen-rich blood. This phase is called diastole. Then the ventricle squeezes and pumps the blood to your body. This pumping phase is called systole.

- When the left ventricle cannot pump well, it is called **systolic heart failure**.
- When the left ventricle cannot fill properly, it is called **diastolic heart failure**.

What increases your risk for heart failure?

Heart failure is generally caused by another disease, such as CAD, heart attack, and high blood pressure. Anything that increases your risk for getting one of those diseases also adds to your risk, or is a risk factor, for heart failure. For example, diabetes increases your chance of having CAD, so it is also a risk factor for heart failure.

Some risk factors exist because of who you are. Some result from your lifestyle choices. Others come from your environment. Some risks that you cannot control include:

- Your age. The risk of developing heart failure rises sharply as you age.
- Your sex. Overall, men are at a higher risk for heart failure than women. But this difference narrows as women get older.

- Your family history. If any of your close relatives have or had heart failure, you may have inherited a risk for heart failure.

You may be able to control many things that increase your risk for heart failure. Examples include:

- Using tobacco. Smoking increases your risk of heart disease.
- Drinking large amounts of alcohol, which can raise your blood pressure, trigger uneven heartbeats, and damage your heart muscle.
- Not getting enough physical activity. Lack of exercise can increase your risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar levels, blood clots, obesity, and stress.
- Poor eating habits, which can cause obesity and lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol.

Having a risk factor does not mean that you will develop heart disease. Even if you have no risk factors, you still may develop heart failure.

How is heart failure treated?

Your doctor's goal is to relieve your symptoms and prevent more heart damage. Your doctor will also need to treat the problem that caused your heart failure. You will probably take several medicines to reduce blood pressure and fluid buildup and decrease your heart's workload.

It is very important to take your medicines exactly as your doctor tells you to and to keep taking them. If you have any problems with the medicines, tell your doctor. You may be able to take different ones to get the same benefit.

Your doctor will also recommend some lifestyle changes. Taking these steps can help you feel better and might help slow the progression of heart failure:

- **Eat less sodium.** Sodium causes you to retain water and makes it harder for your heart to pump.
- **Get regular exercise,** which will help keep your heart healthy.
- **Lose weight** if you are overweight. Even small changes can make a difference.
- **Stop smoking.**
- **Limit alcohol.** Ask your doctor how much, if any, is safe.
- **Control your blood pressure.** Exercise, limit alcohol, and control stress to help keep your blood pressure in a healthy range. You may also need to take medicine.
- **Watch your fluid intake** if your doctor advises it.

Ask your doctor if a cardiac rehab program 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.

Heart failure often gets worse over time and requires more treatment to manage symptoms and control complications. Take your medicines as prescribed, make some lifestyle changes, and work closely with your doctor. These give you the best chance to control heart failure and prevent complications.