

**PATIENT INFORMATION****CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE**

If you don't know what it means, medically speaking, "heart failure" sounds pretty scary. But it really isn't. If your doctor says you have congestive heart failure, it doesn't mean your heart has stopped beating, or that you're about to die. It just means that your heart isn't pumping as well as it should be. In cases of congestive heart failure, the heart keeps working, but less efficiently. This results in a buildup of fluid in the body, often in the legs and in the lung. It can be caused by many forms of heart disease.

***WHAT CAUSES CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE?***

Common causes are:

1. Coronary artery disease. (Narrowed arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle)
2. Past heart attack (myocardial infarction) with scar tissue that interferes with the heart muscle's normal work.
3. High blood pressure (hypertension)
4. Heart valve disease
5. Primary disease of the heart muscle itself (cardiomyopathy)
6. Defects in the heart present at birth (congenital heart disease)
7. Certain medications (e.g. chemotherapy)

Because these disease processes are usually present for years, congestive heart failure typically doesn't occur suddenly. It gradually gets worse over time.

***WHAT HAPPENS IN CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE?***

When the heart doesn't pump as efficiently as it should, the blood flow slows down and less blood is pumped. Then blood returning to the heart backs up in the veins. The resulting increase pressure forces the fluid to leak from the blood vessels into the tissues and accumulate in dependent areas like legs, ankles and feet or back if you are always in bed. The swelling that follows is called **edema** of the feet, ankles and legs.

When the heart's left side isn't pumping as well as it should be, blood backs up in the blood vessels of the lungs. Sometimes fluid is forced out of the lung vessels into the breathing spaces themselves. When this happens it's called **pulmonary edema**; shortness of breath when walking is often the first sign.

A final problem is that a person who has CHF may feel tired. This happens because not enough blood circulates and tissues and organs don't get as much oxygen and food as they need.

## ***WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE?***

Some people with congestive heart failure have few problems or symptoms. The following is a list of problems that people with congestive heart failure might have:

- Shortness of breath (when walking, climbing stairs, or exercising)
- Shortness of breath when lying down flat in bed
- Waking up in the night, suddenly breathless
- General tiredness or weakness
- Swelling or edema of the legs (usually just the feet or ankles)
- Cough
- Weight gain
- Wheezing

## ***HOW IS CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE TREATED?***

Once congestive heart failure has been diagnosed, it can almost always be managed with medicine and the proper diet. With the right treatment and some adjustments in daily life, patients usually feel a lot better. The treatment should reduce your symptoms, maintain a better energy level and increase your ability to exercise, prevent or slow down the progress of the disease, and allow patients to live longer with better quality of life.

### ***THINGS YOU SHOULD DO INCLUDE:***

#### **1. Limit salt intake**

Take the salt shaker off the table.

Use low- salt seasonings.

Substitute fresh vegetables and other low-sodium foods for canned and processed foods.

Always read food labels to check on salt content.

Discuss the use of salt substitutes with your doctor (since these may contain extra potassium, which may or may not be appropriate).

#### **2. Control weight**

Weigh yourself each day. Your doctor will tell you what your optimal weight should be. If your weight exceeds what your doctor tells you, call ASAP because this indicates that you might be accumulating too much fluid.

#### **3. Take the medications correctly as prescribed**

Many different medicines are used to treat heart failure. You may need one or more medicines, depending on your symptoms and test results. Your doctor will discuss these medicines with you. It may take a while to find the best medicine for you and the best amount of it.

Some kinds of medicines are commonly used to treat heart failure:

- ***Ace inhibitors.*** (e.g. lisinopril, benazapril, enalapril) Ace inhibitors may help people with heart failure live longer and healthier. Usually they make you feel better too, although often not right away. They may cause a dry cough as a side effect.
- ***Diuretics.*** (e.g. furosemide (Lasix), spino lactone (Aldactone)) Diuretics are often called "water pills" because they make you urinate more often and help keep fluid from building up in your body. If you have swelling in your ankles, diuretics should help. They can also decrease fluid that collects in your lungs. This helps to make you less breathless.

- **Digoxin.** Digoxin helps the heart pump better. You might take it if you are still having symptoms even though you're using the first two medicines. Digoxin also helps if you have certain types of irregular heart beat.
- **Beta Blockers.** (e.g. metoprolol, carvedilol) Evidence shows that these medicines also help people with heart failure live longer and healthier. The major side effects are fatigue and slowing of the heart rate.

You might need to take other medicines if you have other problems or if you have side effects with any of these medicines. When you're taking medicine for heart failure, you'll need to have regular blood tests to check your potassium level and kidney function. How often you need blood tests depends on the type and strength of medicine you are taking. Many patients take these medicines without any problems. However, if you have concerns about the medicine or think you may be having side effects, you should talk to your doctor. You should not alter the amount of medicine you are taking without asking your doctor first.

#### 4. Exercise

As a general rule, it's better for people with congestive heart failure to stay active. By exercising regularly and staying in good shape, they'll feel better and be able to do more.

If you have congestive heart failure, it's important to discuss an exercise program with your doctor. In some cases a supervised exercise test (a so-called *stress test*) may be necessary before you can start an exercise program at home. Aerobic exercise, such as walking, swimming, or biking, is preferable.

Avoid isometric exercises that require holding your breath, bearing down and sudden bursts of energy. Also avoid lifting weights, competitive or contact sports and exercises that cause chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness and lightheadedness.

People with heart failure shouldn't exercise right after meals, when it's too hot or humid, or when they don't feel good. Ask your physician as to the use of hot tub or spa.

#### ***WHEN SHOULD I CALL MY DOCTOR?***

Weigh yourself each day on bathroom scales when you get up in the morning. You should weigh yourself after urinating, but before you eat breakfast. **If you gain 3 to 5 pounds**, you should tell your doctor. This weight gain might mean your body is retaining fluid. Your doctor may increase the amount of medicine you take. You should also call your doctor **if you are becoming short of breath or see swelling of your ankles or feet.**