



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT  
HEART FAILURE  
AMERICA'S SILENT EPIDEMIC

HEART  
failure  
AWARENESS

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## What You Should Know About Heart Failure

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Heart failure is a condition that affects nearly five million Americans of all ages and is responsible for more hospitalizations than all forms of cancer combined. Over 400,000 new cases of heart failure will be diagnosed in the next year. Yet many people with heart failure are not aware they have it, because some of the most common symptoms of heart failure, such as feeling tired and short of breath, are often mistaken for normal signs of getting older. Also, people may try to avoid symptoms by making lifestyle changes such as taking the elevator instead of the stairs, sleeping with extra pillows or cutting back on their favorite sports.

Some of the most common questions and answers regarding heart failure are found in this brochure. Remember, early diagnosis and treatment are very important, so if you think you may be at risk for heart failure, visit your doctor as soon as possible. Based on taking your medical history, examining you, and you having the necessary tests, your doctor can tell if you have heart failure and how it can be managed.

### What Is Heart Failure? What Causes It?

Despite the way it sounds, heart failure does not mean that the heart suddenly stopped working or that you are about to die. Rather, heart failure is a common condition that usually develops slowly as the heart muscle weakens and needs to work harder to keep blood flowing through the body. Heart failure develops following injury to the heart such as the damage caused by a heart attack, long-term high blood pressure, or an abnormality of one of the heart valves. The weakened heart must work harder to keep up with the demands of the body, which is why people with heart failure often complain of feeling tired.



## What Are Some Of The Symptoms Of Heart Failure?

- Shortness of breath, which can happen even during mild activity
- Difficulty breathing when lying down
- Weight gain with swelling in the legs and ankles from fluid retention
- General fatigue and weakness

## What Puts Me At Risk For Heart Failure?

- High blood pressure (hypertension)
- Heart attack (myocardial infarction)
- Damage to the heart valves or history of a heart murmur
- Enlargement of the heart
- Family history of enlarged heart
- Diabetes

## How Is Heart Failure Diagnosed?

Only your doctor can tell you if you have heart failure. When you visit your doctor, he/she should review your medical history and conduct a full physical examination.

Physicians often order a number of tests when exploring a possible diagnosis of heart failure. Many of them are painless and simple. The most important of these tests is an echocardiogram, or “echo” for short. This test tells your doctor what your ejection fraction, or “EF,” is. The ejection fraction is a measurement of how well your heart is pumping. People with a healthy heart usually have an ejection fraction of 50 percent or greater. Most people with heart failure, but not all, have an ejection fraction of 40 percent or less.



## How Can I Learn To Live With Heart Failure?

If you have been diagnosed with heart failure, there are many things that you can do to help yourself. Limiting your intake of salts is very important and you should learn what prepared foods have large amounts of salt. It is important for you to weigh yourself each day and contact your healthcare provider if your weight changes significantly. Exercising at levels recommended by your physician is of great importance in keeping you fit and well. Taking your medications is also beneficial. In addition, it is important for you to maintain frequent visits to your physician and notify him or her if there are any changes in your symptoms. Finally, it is essential that both you and your family understand what heart failure is, what the symptoms are, what you should do if your symptoms change and how your doctors treat this disease. These questions can be answered by your doctors, health practitioners or nurses who work in your doctor's office.

## How Is Heart Failure Treated?

Early diagnosis and treatment are very important, and recently there have been some major steps forward in treatment. Today, doctors can do more than ever, so many people with heart failure can live normal lives and be less at risk for being hospitalized. If you are diagnosed with heart failure, there are a number of medications that work together to improve your symptoms and help keep your heart failure from getting worse. Taking these medicines, in addition to eating right and getting regular exercise, will help improve your health.

## How Can I Find Out More About Heart Failure?

You should ask your healthcare provider for information about heart failure. He or she can point you to helpful books, support groups and other resources.

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