

Patient information from BMJ

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Heart failure

It can be frightening to hear your doctor talk about heart failure. It is a serious condition. But it doesn't mean that your heart is about to stop working or that you're about to die. There are good treatments that can help, and many people live with heart failure for many years.

What is heart failure?

Heart failure means your heart isn't pumping blood around your body as well as it should. It usually happens because your heart has been damaged by another medical condition. For example, a heart attack can damage your heart and lead to heart failure.

There are several different types of heart failure. The kind you have depends on which part of your heart has been damaged.

What are the symptoms?

One of the main symptoms of heart failure is feeling breathless. It's normal to gasp for breath after exercise, but if you have heart failure, you may get out of breath doing everyday things.

You may find it especially hard to breathe when you're lying down. Many people with heart failure prop themselves up with pillows at night.

Heart failure can also make you feel weak and tired. You feel tired because your heart can't pump enough blood to your muscles to give them all the energy they need.

Heart failure also causes your body to hold onto too much water. This extra water can leak into your lungs. This can cause you to cough up pink, frothy phlegm. You may find the extra water makes your feet, legs, and ankles swollen and puffy.

Your doctor will need to examine you carefully and do tests before he or she can say for sure you have heart failure.

What treatments work?

There are several treatments that can help if you have heart failure. Medicines can keep your symptoms under control, help you feel better, and help you live longer.

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One of the main reasons that people with heart failure end up in hospital is because they stop taking their medicine. Even if you don't like taking them, don't stop without talking to your doctor.

Eating healthily and taking exercise can also help if you have heart failure. To read more, see our information on self-care for people with heart failure. Talk to your doctor about how to get started with exercise, if you are unsure. Many people start with a gentle walk.

Common medicines for heart failure

You'll probably need to take several medicines together. Your doctor may suggest that you take types of medicines called ACE inhibitors and beta-blockers, and maybe other medicines too.

- ACE inhibitors widen your blood vessels, which takes some of the strain off your heart.
- Beta-blockers work by slowing your heart down so it doesn't need as much oxygen.
- Diuretics help your body get rid of extra water. You may need to take them for a while to help you feel less breathless and reduce the swelling in your feet and legs.

All medicines can have side effects. Talk to your doctor if you get symptoms that you think are caused by your medicines. You may be able to change to a different type or dose.

Other treatments

If you're taking medicine and you still get symptoms, make sure you see your doctor. He or she might suggest you try different drugs. You may also be given treatment for the particular kind of heart failure you have.

For example, if your heart beat is irregular, you may be given medicine to help it beat more normally. Also, if your heart failure gets worse for a time, you might need extra medicines while it gets better.

Surgery can also be used to treat heart failure. If the blood vessels in your heart are blocked or damaged, surgery may help to repair them. If your heart doesn't beat at the right speed, or the different parts of your heart don't beat together, a pacemaker may help.

You might also have a device inserted in your chest that can shock your heart into starting again if it stops beating. This is called a defibrillator. Defibrillators are sometimes combined with pacemakers.

What will happen to me?

Being told you have a serious illness can come as a big shock. You may be wondering how heart failure will affect your future, or be worried that it will shorten your life.

It's difficult to say exactly what will happen to you. Heart failure is a complicated illness, and it affects people differently. But lots of people with heart failure are treated successfully and live for many years.

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If your heart failure gets worse for a time, you may need to go into hospital for treatment and to be looked after. You might need extra treatments at this time.

You're likely to do better if you try to keep healthy and make sure you take your medicines. There are also things you can do yourself to keep healthy and out of hospital. To read more, see our information on self-care for people with heart failure.

Where to get more help and support

Heart failure is a serious condition, and it's important to get all the help and support that's available. Many people find it useful to talk to other people with heart failure. You could ask your doctor about support groups in your area. For example, in the UK, the British Heart Foundation (bhf.org.uk) keeps a list of all the heart support groups in England and Wales.

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