

Patient information from BMJ

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Heart failure: how can I help myself?

Heart failure is a serious condition that can be frightening to hear about. But it doesn't mean that your heart is about to stop working. It means your heart may need support to help it work better.

There are treatments that can help, and people can live with heart failure for many years. There are also lots of things you can do yourself to look after your heart and stay healthy.

Things you can do

Make sure you take your tablets

If you have heart failure it is very important to take your medicines as directed. If you miss a dose of some medicines, or stop taking them suddenly, it can make your symptoms worse.

Some tips you may find helpful for remembering your medicines include:

- taking them at the same time every day. For example, getting into a routine of taking them when you brush your teeth
- organising them into a tablet box. You can buy tablet boxes with compartments for the medicines you need at certain times
- asking your pharmacist to make up a weekly tablet pack for you
- asking friends or family to help remind you to take your medicine.

If you are still having problems taking your medicine, talk to your doctor. You might be given long-acting tablets that you don't need to take as often. And if you are getting side effects from the medicines, you may be able to switch to another one.

If you have another condition such as diabetes or high blood pressure and are taking medicines for these, you will need to follow your doctor's advice about treatment.

Stop smoking

If you smoke, one of the most important things you can do is stop. Stopping will mean you feel less short of breath and will make you healthier. It may also help prevent coughs and chest infections which can make your heart failure worse.

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It's easier to stop smoking if you get help from a doctor. They will be able to talk you through the different treatment options that are available to you to help you stop smoking.

Weigh yourself regularly

Heart failure can cause your body to hold on to too much water. The easiest way to check for this is to weigh yourself every day.

If you put on more than 2 kilograms (4 pounds) in three days or less, it may be because there's too much water in your body. If you do notice sudden weight gain, talk to your doctor. They may need to alter your medicine.

Avoid eating too much salt

It's important to make sure you don't have a lot of salt in your diet. This is because salt encourages your body to hold on to water, and too much water in your body can make symptoms of heart failure worse.

Food without salt can seem to have less taste until you get used to it. Try adding other flavours to your food to enhance it. For example, onions, garlic, ginger, chilli, herbs, lemon, vinegar, or black pepper.

There's a lot of salt in processed foods, such as breakfast cereals, tinned foods, stock cubes, ready meals, fast food, and biscuits. Cutting these out can help a lot.

Talk to your doctor before you try 'low salt' substitutes. They usually contain potassium instead of normal salt. Too much potassium is not recommended for people with heart failure. And some medicines for heart failure can also increase the amount of potassium in your body.

Get your flu and pneumonia vaccines

Flu and pneumonia are more dangerous for people with heart failure. Your doctor will probably recommend you get vaccinated against these infectious diseases.

You have these vaccines as injections. You'll need a new flu vaccine every year. The pneumonia vaccine is usually only given once.

Take your doctor's advice about drinking alcohol

Some people with heart failure can drink alcohol in moderation (within recommended limits). But if your doctor has told you that your heart failure was caused by alcohol, it's better not to drink at all. Ask your doctor what's best for you.

Lose weight if you need to

Losing weight if you need to can reduce the strain on your heart. Your doctor, nurse, or dietitian can give you advice on losing weight with a healthy diet.

The main thing is to choose a diet that you can stick to. Many people find it easier to lose weight if they join a group and have other people for support.

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Exercise

Exercise can help you feel better, be less breathless, and live longer.

Even simple things, like going for a walk every day, can make a difference. Your doctor or nurse can give you advice about exercise programmes and how to exercise safely.

What happens next?

You may have to make some changes to your routine. You should be able to keep active, see friends and family, and keep up the hobbies you enjoy. You may just need to ensure you take enough rest, and get more support where needed.

Tell your doctor what you do in your job. If you have a job where you're physically active, you may need to adapt it to suit you, or think about whether you can continue to do it.

Your doctor should be able to advise you about whether you can drive. You'll need to tell the driving authority where you live about your heart failure. For example, in the UK, it's the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

If you're worried about whether you can have sex or not, you can talk to your doctor. Doctors discuss this with many patients, so you shouldn't feel embarrassed.

Advice for common problems

Difficulty sleeping. If you have problems sleeping because you are short of breath, try using pillows to prop yourself up. If you mention difficulties sleeping, your doctor may also test you for a condition called sleep apnoea. There are treatments that can help you breathe more easily whilst asleep.

Low mood. Make sure you talk to your doctor if you are feeling worried or have a very low mood because of your heart failure. There are organisations that can provide emotional and practical support. Your doctor may be able to recommend organisations that are local to you.

Increased need to urinate. Some people with heart failure have to get up and go to the toilet at night. If this bothers you, ask your doctor if it's possible to take your diuretics (tablets that make your body get rid of water) in the morning. This may make them less likely to cause you to get up at night.

When to call the doctor

It's important to be aware of any changes in your symptoms. If you get a new problem, or any of your symptoms get worse, call your doctor.

Things to tell your doctor about include a cough, changes in your weight, shortness of breath when you're resting, trouble sleeping, lack of appetite, or more swelling in your legs than usual.

Call an ambulance straight away if you get chest pain, trouble breathing, or a feeling as if you're going to pass out. These can all be signs of a medical emergency.

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