Heart failure – self-management tips

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What is heart failure?

Heart failure occurs when the heart cannot pump enough blood and oxygen to support other organs. Symptoms of heart failure usually develop over many months as your heart becomes weaker and less able to pump the blood that your body needs.

Heart failure usually results in an enlarged heart (left ventricle). It is a serious condition, but it does not mean the heart has stopped beating. The heart continues to work but the body’s needs for blood and oxygen are not being met.

Around 5 million people in the US have heart failure¹, and it is one of the most common reasons people aged 65 and older are hospitalized. There are several different causes of heart failure, the most common being clogged arteries not allowing enough blood to flow to the heart. Others include heart attack, heart defects, high blood pressure, and heart valve disease.

Treatment of heart failure

Early diagnosis and treatment can improve quality of life and life expectancy. Treatment usually involves taking medicines, reducing salt in the diet, and engaging in daily physical activity. People with heart failure also track their daily symptoms and discuss them with their doctors.

Living with heart failure is a team effort

No matter what approach is recommended, cooperation with a healthcare team is vital. Family members and friends can provide support, reminders and encouragement.

People with heart failure may experience:

• Fluid buildup; causing swelling in feet, ankles, and legs.
• Shortness of breath with mild activity.
• Difficulty breathing when lying down.
• General fatigue and weakness.

How can you manage your condition?
Consult your healthcare provider and live a healthy lifestyle

- It is vital that a healthcare provider monitor your heart health and medications.
- Keep all your appointments and be prepared to ask questions.
- Medications for heart failure can only work if taken as prescribed.
- Flu and pneumonia are especially dangerous for people with heart failure. Be sure you are immunized and avoid people with communicable diseases.

**Eat a healthy diet**

- Our bodies need the right vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients to stay healthy. A healthy diet includes: whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and lowfat milk products.
- Cholesterol and saturated fat contribute to coronary artery disease, a major cause of heart failure.
- Cut down on sodium (salt); look for low-sodium or no salt added products; such as, soup, canned vegetables, snack food and lunch meats.
- Add more fiber to your diet by eating plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables, and whole grains.

**Maintain a healthy weight**

- Being overweight or obese can increase your risk for heart disease.
- Weight increases can be a sign of increased fluid retention. Report a gain of over two pounds in a day or five pounds in a week. Make sure to weigh yourself at the same time each day.

**Exercise regularly**

- Regular exercise can help the heart pump more efficiently and can help you maintain a healthy weight by lowering cholesterol and blood pressure.
- Check with your local senior center or community center to find low cost or free exercise classes.

**Take steps to quit smoking**

- Cigarette smoking damages blood vessels and puts extra strain on your heart therefore greatly increasing your risk for heart disease. Your doctor can suggest ways to help you quit.
- If you do smoke, call 1-800-QUIT NOW (1-800-784-8669) for guidance.

**Limit alcohol use**

- As we age we become more sensitive to alcohol's effects. The same amount of alcohol can have a greater effect on an older adult than on someone who is younger.
- Alcoholic beverages can weaken the heart and may interact negatively with your medications. Discuss safe levels of alcohol intake with your healthcare provider.
- Older adults are more likely to have health problems that can become more serious with alcohol. Some examples of these conditions are stroke, high blood pressure, memory loss, and mood disorders.

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