

# The family library

The word "LEARN" is written in large, bold, blue 3D block letters. A black cord extends from the bottom of the letters and connects to a black and white computer mouse. The entire graphic is set against a light blue, slightly tilted rectangular background.

## CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE (CHF)

### What is CHF?

Congestive heart failure (CHF), or heart failure, means the heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Over time, conditions such as narrowed arteries in the heart (coronary artery disease) or high blood pressure gradually leave the heart too weak or stiff to fill and pump efficiently.

Many conditions that lead to heart failure cannot be reversed, but heart failure can often be treated with good results. Medications can improve the signs and symptoms of heart failure and help one live longer. Lifestyle changes, such as exercising, reducing the salt in one's diet, managing stress, treating depression, and especially losing weight, can improve quality of life.

The best way to prevent heart failure is to control risk factors and conditions that cause heart failure, such as coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes or obesity.

### Symptoms

Heart failure can be chronic — meaning the condition is ongoing — or acute, meaning the condition has started suddenly.

#### Chronic heart failure signs and symptoms

- Shortness of breath (dyspnea) with exertion or rest
- Fatigue and weakness
- Swelling (edema) in the legs, ankles and feet
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Reduced ability to exercise
- Persistent cough or wheezing with white or pink blood-tinged phlegm

## CHF (cont.)



### Chronic heart failure signs and symptoms (cont.)

- Swelling of the abdomen (ascites)
- Sudden weight gain from fluid retention
- Lack of appetite and nausea
- Difficulty concentrating or decreased alertness

### Acute heart failure signs and symptoms

- Symptoms similar to those of chronic heart failure, but more severe and start or worsen suddenly
- Sudden fluid buildup
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat (palpitations)
- Sudden, severe shortness of breath and coughing up pink, foamy mucus
- Chest pain, if the heart failure is caused by a heart attack

### When to see a doctor

A doctor should be seen in the case of any of the signs or symptoms associated with heart failure. These include:

- Chest pain
- Fatigue and weakness
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Shortness of breath (dyspnea) with exertion or rest
- Persistent cough or wheezing with white or pink blood-tinged phlegm
- Swelling in the abdomen, legs, ankles and feet
- Difficulty concentrating or decreased alertness

One may first find out they have heart failure from an emergency room visit after worsening symptoms. Other heart and lung problems can cause symptoms that are similar to heart failure.

## CHF (cont.)



### Diagnosis

To diagnose heart failure, a doctor will take a careful medical history and perform a physical examination. The doctor will also check for the presence of risk factors such as high blood pressure. Using a stethoscope, a doctor can listen to a patient's lungs for signs of congestion. The stethoscope also picks up abnormal heart sounds that may suggest heart failure. The doctor may examine the veins in the neck and check for fluid buildup in the abdomen and legs. After the physical exam, the doctor may also order some of these tests:

- Blood tests.
- Chest X-ray
- Electrocardiogram (ECG).
- Echocardiogram
- Ejection fraction.
- Stress test.
- Cardiac computerized tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- Coronary catheterization (angiogram)

### Treatment

- Heart failure is a chronic disease needing lifelong management. However, with treatment, signs and symptoms of heart failure can improve and the heart sometimes becomes stronger.
- Treatment can help patients live longer and reduce the chance of dying suddenly. Doctors sometimes can correct heart failure by treating the underlying cause. For example, repairing a heart valve or controlling a fast heart rhythm may reverse heart failure. But for most people, the treatment of heart failure involves a balance of the right medications, and in some cases, devices that help the heart beat and contract properly.

## CHF (cont.)



### Medications

Doctors usually treat heart failure with a combination of medications. Depending on the symptoms, one might take one or more of these drugs. They include:

- Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors. (widens blood vessels to lower blood pressure, improve blood flow and decrease the workload on the heart)
- Digoxin (Lanoxin) (increases the strength of heart muscle contractions and slows heart rate)
- Beta blockers (slow the heart rate and reduce blood pressure)
- Diuretics (sometimes called water pills)

Patients often need to take two or more medications to treat heart failure. Doctors may prescribe other heart medications as well — such as nitrates for chest pain, a statin to lower cholesterol or blood-thinning medications to help prevent blood clots — along with heart failure medications.

Hospitalization may be required for a flare-up of heart failure symptoms. While in the hospital, one may receive additional medications to help the heart pump better and relieve symptoms. One may also receive supplemental oxygen through a mask or small tubes placed in the nose. With severe heart failure, one may need to use supplemental oxygen long term.

### Surgery and medical devices

In some cases, doctors recommend surgery to treat the underlying problem that led to heart failure. Some treatments being studied and used in certain people include:

- Coronary bypass surgery
- Heart valve repair or replacement
- Implantable cardioverter-defibrillators (ICDs) (similar to a pacemaker and can shock the heart if needed)
- Heart pumps (left ventricular assist devices or LVADs).
- Heart transplant

## CHF (cont.)



### **End-of-life care and heart failure**

Even with the number of treatments available for heart failure, it's possible that heart failure may worsen to the point a heart transplant isn't an option, and one may need to enter hospice care. Hospice care provides a special course of treatment to terminally ill people.

Hospice care allows family and friends — with the aid of nurses, social workers and trained volunteers — to care for and comfort a loved one at home or in hospice residences. It also provides emotional, social and spiritual support for people who are ill and those closest to them. Although most people under hospice care remain in their own homes, the program is available anywhere — including nursing homes and assisted living centers. For people who stay in a hospital, specialists in end-of-life care can provide comfort, compassionate care and dignity.

Although it can be extremely difficult, it is important for people to discuss end-of-life issues with their family and medical team. Part of this discussion will likely involve advance directives - a general term for oral and written instructions one gives concerning medical care should they become unable to speak for themselves. If one has an implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD), an important consideration to discuss with family and doctors is turning off the defibrillator so it can't deliver shocks to make the heart continue beating.

## CHF (cont.)



### Prevention

The key to preventing heart failure is to reduce risk factors. One can control or eliminate many of the risk factors for heart disease — high blood pressure and coronary artery disease, for example — by making lifestyle changes along with the help of any needed medications.

Lifestyle changes one can make to help prevent heart failure include:

- Not smoking
- Controlling certain conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes
- Staying physically active
- Eating healthy foods
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Reducing and managing stress

For more information on CHF click [HERE](#).