

Patient information from BMJ

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Heart failure: how can I help myself?

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. There are lots of things you can do to look after yourself and stay well.

What can I do?

If you have heart failure, there are lots of things you can do to feel better, stay healthier, and stay out of hospital. You might like to ask a friend or family member to help you with some of these things.

Make sure you take your tablets

For people with heart failure, one of the most common causes of ending up in hospital is not taking their medicine. That's understandable, when you have lots of pills to remember.

If you have problems taking your medicine, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to give you long-acting tablets that you don't need to take as often. You may be able to switch to another medicine or a lower dose, if you are getting side effects.

It can be easier to remember your tablets if you take them at the same time each day. You could make a timetable of what you need to take and when.

You can get pill boxes with separate compartments for the medicines you need to take at different times. Your pharmacist can make up a weekly pill pack for you.

If you have other conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure, you will also need to follow your doctor's advice about those. That will probably include taking other medicines.

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 overall. 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. Talk to your doctor about whether treatments like nicotine replacement patches can help you.

There are also medicines to help people stop smoking. These treatments aren't suitable for everyone. Talk to your doctor about whether they are right for you.

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. He or she may need to alter your medicine.

Cut down on salt

Salt encourages your body to hold on to water. This can be harmful if you have heart failure. You may need to cut your salt to a maximum of 2g to 3g a day (about half a teaspoon).

Food without salt can seem to have less taste until you get used to it. Try onions, garlic, ginger, chilli, herbs, lemon, vinegar, or black pepper to add flavour without using salt.

There's a lot of salt in processed and convenience 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, which contains sodium. Some drugs for heart failure affect the amount of potassium in your body, and getting too much can be harmful.

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 diseases.

You have these vaccines as injections. You'll need a new flu vaccine every year, but you'll usually need the pneumonia vaccine only 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.

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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.

Exercise

You may worry that exercise could put a strain on your heart. But exercise can help you feel better, be less breathless, and live longer.

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

Can I live a normal life?

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 most of the time. If your symptoms are under control, you should be able to lead a fairly normal life.

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).

Some people worry about whether they'll be able to have sex. It's unlikely to be a problem. If you're worried, you can talk to your doctor. Doctors discuss this with many patients, so you shouldn't feel embarrassed.

If you have problems sleeping because you're short of breath, try using pillows to prop yourself up. 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 so they're less likely to cause you to get up at night.

When to call the doctor

It's important that you watch for any changes in your symptoms. If you get a new problem, or any of your symptoms get worse, call your doctor.

Things to watch out for 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.

Chest pain, trouble breathing, and feeling as if you're going to pass out can all be signs of an emergency. Call an ambulance straight away if you get any of these.

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