

Congestive Heart Failure



What Is CHF?

Congestive heart failure (CHF) occurs when the heart cannot pump enough blood through the body. The heart fails because of underlying problems. Clogged arteries, high blood pressure, a heart defect, or other medical conditions finally affect the heart. The symptoms of CHF take many years to develop. Common symptoms are weakness, feeling tired, and being short of breath. You are unable to do everyday physical activities. Walking, carrying groceries, and gardening make you tired.

The heart often makes adjustments to hide the underlying problem. The heart enlarges, allowing more blood into the heart, and the heart's muscle fibers may thicken. This strengthens the heart and its contractions, pumping more blood. The heart may contract more often to increase circulation. These adjustments are only temporary, however. After a certain period of time, the heart cannot offset the lost capability to pump blood. The symptoms are more easily noticed, but the damage has been done.

Nearly 5 million people have congestive heart failure. Another 550,000 new patients are added every year. CHF is increasing as the population ages. It can affect anyone of any age. However, older adults are more likely to

have it. Men have it more than women. African-Americans are twice as likely to die from congestive heart failure. The term heart failure may sound scary. However, with appropriate medical care and knowledge, you can lead a full life.

CHF is serious. It is one of the most severe symptoms of having heart disease. It is often a life-long condition. A patient's future condition depends on age, the severity of the heart failure, overall health, and other factors. There is no cure, but once CHF is diagnosed, it can be managed. However, if the underlying heart disease is treatable, then patients' hearts can function much better.

This brochure will help you understand congestive heart failure and what you can do to live a quality life. Some of the things you'll learn include: proper nutrition, exercise, and medication. It is important to lead a common sense lifestyle and follow your doctor's advice.



Avoiding the Causes

Since CHF is a symptom of heart disease, the risk factors for it are similar to coronary heart disease and include:

- › **Smoking**
- › **High cholesterol**
- › **Hypertension or high blood pressure**
- › **Diabetes**
- › **Obesity**

A single risk factor may be enough to cause heart failure. More than one factor greatly increases the risk.

The major risk factors are hypertension (high blood pressure) and diabetes. Uncontrolled high blood pressure doubles the likelihood of congestive heart failure. Diabetics, especially women, have two to eight times the risk. Advanced age is another factor.

Patients may also experience congestive heart failure because of arrhythmias, or irregular heartbeats. Another cause is damage to the heart, especially valves, from coronary heart disease.

Remember, the causes of congestive heart failure slowly happen throughout one's life. Young adults should avoid the risk factors that often lead to congestive heart failure. Older adults should change their lifestyle and remove the risks as soon as possible.

Recognizing the Signs

Congestive heart failure doesn't happen overnight. However, the symptoms are usually very clear. If you recognize any of these signs, then it is time to see your doctor.

- › **Dyspnea** – Shortness of breath during activities or even while sleeping
- › **Coughing or wheezing** – The lungs fill with fluid, sometimes producing a white or pink frothy phlegm
- › **Too much fluid in body tissues** (edema) – Feet, ankles, and legs swell and weight increases
- › **Tiredness and fatigue** – Constant tired feeling and an inability to walk, climb stairs, or do the simplest chores
- › **Loss of appetite, nausea** – No interest in food, feeling sick to your stomach
- › **Confusion** – Loss of memory or concentration
- › **Increased heart rate** – A racing or throbbing heart





The Team Approach to Treatment

It takes a team effort to help people live with congestive heart failure.

In most cases, your physician will diagnose congestive heart failure during a physical exam. Tell him or her about the signs you've recognized. Your physician may notice them anyway. Your physician will also discuss the risk factors and the history of your heart's general condition. Your physician may order laboratory tests to make sure of his or her diagnosis.

You are part of the treatment team, too. You can minimize the effects of heart failure by controlling the risk factors for heart disease.

- **Stop smoking**
- **Lose weight**
- **Abstain from alcohol**
- **Improve your diet**
- **Exercise regularly as directed by your physician**

The efforts of you and your doctor may not be enough to control congestive heart failure. In some cases, treating your primary heart disease can cure heart failure. Fixing heart valve defects may also lead to a cure. However, patients with the common forms of heart failure often take medicines to help sustain and improve their lives.

Useful Medications

Several types of medicines have proven useful in the treatment of heart failure.

- Diuretics help reduce fluid in the body. This is important for patients with fluid retention and hypertension. Fluid retention often causes quick weight gain. This puts a burden on the heart.
- Digitalis increases the force of the heart's contractions. This improves circulation.
- Angiotensin converting enzyme, or ACE, inhibitors are proving to be very useful. ACE inhibitors improve the survival rates of heart failure patients. These medicines slow, or even prevent, the loss of heart pumping activity.

As a heart failure patient, your treatment program will match your specific symptoms and condition. Take seriously whatever treatment or lifestyle changes your doctor recommends. By working together, you, your doctor, and other health care professionals can help you set and achieve lifestyle improvement goals to make living with heart failure easier.



Making the Most of Your Doctor Visit

Here are some points you may want to discuss with your doctor. Don't hesitate to ask questions for a better understanding of your condition. Also, ask your doctor to rephrase a reply you cannot understand. You may want to take a family member or friend to the appointment with you. They can help you better understand and remember what is said.

- Briefly describe your symptoms, even those you feel may not be important. You may want to keep a list so you will remember them.
- Tell the doctor all of the medications you take—including over-the-counter drugs—and any problems you may be having with them.
- Be sure you understand all of the doctor's instructions—especially for medications. Know what drug to take when, how often, and in what amount.
- Find out what side effects are possible from any drug the doctor prescribes for you.
- Ask the meaning of any medical term you don't understand.
- If, after your appointment, you still have questions or are uncertain about your treatment, call the doctor's office to obtain the information you need.

For more information, look on the Web sites listed below, or contact:

American Heart Association (AHA)

Telephone: 800-242-8721

Web site: www.americanheart.org

National Institute of Health

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

Telephone: 301-592-8573

E-mail: nhibinfo@rover.nhlbi.nih.gov

Web site: www.nhlbi.nih.gov

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American Heart Association. Congestive heart failure. October 14, 2003. Available at: <http://americanheart.org/presenter/jhtml?identifier=1486>.



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