

Introduction: Taking Control of Heart Failure

The Heart Failure Society of America (HFSA) is a non-profit organization of health care professionals and researchers who are dedicated to enhancing quality and duration of life for patients with heart failure and preventing the condition in those at risk. These educational modules have been developed to help patients, their families, and individuals at risk for heart failure understand and cope with the disease. For more information about the Society please visit our web site www.hfsa.org.



www.hfsa.org

Heart Failure Society
of America

Contact Information

Please write down important contact information in the space below. You may also want to share this information with family members and friends.

Doctor Treating Me for Heart Failure:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip code: _____

Phone number: _____

Fax: _____

E-mail: _____

Other Important Phone Numbers:

Ambulance, fire department, or emergency services: **911**

Pharmacy: _____

Other doctors or nurses: _____

Introduction

Many people with heart failure lead normal, active lives. They do so because they have learned to take good care of themselves. You can take control of heart failure by understanding and carefully following your treatment plan. The Heart Failure Society of America has prepared a series of modules to help you learn to live successfully with heart failure.

Currently, your symptoms may seriously limit your activities. You may feel frightened by your diagnosis. You may also feel discouraged about your treatment plan. The advice in this series of modules can help you feel better, stay out of the hospital and live longer. It can also build confidence in your ability to live well with heart failure and its treatment.

This module provides basic information on heart failure. It will help you:

- Understand your treatment plan.
- Learn how to actively work with your doctor or nurse so you can feel better.
- Learn how to overcome common stumbling blocks in following your treatment plan.

What is Heart Failure?

Many people mistakenly believe that heart failure means that the heart has stopped or is about to stop. Heart failure simply means that the heart is not pumping blood through the body as well as it should. As the heart's pumping action weakens, blood backs up into the blood vessels around the lungs and causes seepage of fluid into the lungs. The fluid causes congestion and makes it hard to breathe. Many people with heart failure also have swollen legs and feet. That is why heart failure is sometimes called congestive heart failure.

Heart failure is a serious illness that can affect how long you live. You may have heard that some people may die sooner because of heart failure. But with proper medications in the right doses and careful management, you can live longer and feel better.



In most cases, heart failure can't be cured, but it can be brought under control with careful work on your part. Careful management means that you should:

- Take all of the medicines ordered by your doctor or nurse.
- Follow a low-sodium (salt) diet.
- Stop smoking.
- Remain physically active.
- Lose weight if you are overweight.
- Drink alcohol sparingly, if at all.

You should also check yourself every day for signs that your heart failure is getting worse. You should:

- Weigh yourself.
- Look for swelling.

These things may seem hard to do. But your active input in the treatment plan is essential. This series of modules will give you many tips and ideas to make it easier for you to take control of your condition.

Causes of Heart Failure



Heart failure usually occurs when another problem makes the heart weak or stiff so it doesn't pump or fill normally. A common cause of heart failure is heart attack. The medical term your doctor may use for this cause of heart failure is ischemic cardiomyopathy.

Other causes include high blood pressure, infection of the heart muscle, lung disease, diabetes, and problems with the heart valves. Drinking too much alcohol for a long time can also cause heart failure.

Sometimes the exact cause of heart failure is not known. Idiopathic dilated cardiomyopathy is the medical term for this type of heart failure.

Ask your doctor for the cause(s) of your heart failure. There may be special things you can do to care for yourself, based on the specific reasons for your condition.

My heart failure is caused by:

Other Questions to Ask

The list of questions below can help you talk about heart failure with your doctor or nurse. The answers can help you understand heart failure better. Talking with your doctor or nurse will also help ensure that you are receiving the best possible care.

Always feel free to ask your doctor or nurse questions. You may want to have a family member or friend help you ask questions if you are not comfortable doing it alone.

Remember that an active partnership between you and your doctor and nurse makes for the best health care.

Do I have blockages in my coronary arteries?

Reason for asking this question: Coronary artery disease is the most common cause of heart failure. With this disease, blockages in the coronary arteries decrease or cut off the blood supply to portions of the heart muscle. Sometimes it is possible to open the blockages and restore the blood supply to the heart. This may improve heart function and reduce your symptoms. Knowing whether your heart failure is related to blocked coronary arteries can help your doctor plan the best treatment for you.

Is my blood pressure high?

Is it under control?

Reason for asking these questions: High blood pressure is a major cause of heart failure. It can also make heart failure worse.

When someone has heart failure, it is wise to reduce the amount of strain on the heart in any way possible. Reducing blood pressure to normal levels is one important way to reduce strain on the heart. It is important for you to know your blood pressure and whether it is under control. That way you and your doctor can make sure it is managed well.

Are my heart valves damaged?

Reason for asking this question: Heart valve damage is another cause of heart failure. Sometimes, valve damage can be repaired so that heart failure improves. Therefore, it is important to know if your valves are damaged.

Other Questions to Ask *(cont.)*



What is my heart function (ejection fraction)?

Reason for asking this question: Heart function is commonly assessed using a number called the ejection fraction. Some people mistakenly believe their ejection fraction indicates the amount of heart muscle that is still working. The ejection fraction refers to the percentage of blood that is pumped out of the heart each time it beats.

A heart does not pump all of the available blood out each time it beats. A normal heart pumps out or ejects only about 50-65% of the blood inside. If the heart is damaged, the ejection fraction frequently falls below 40%. This is called systolic heart failure. However, you can have a normal ejection fraction and still have heart failure. This may be related to a condition called diastolic heart failure.

An echocardiogram is the test most commonly used to evaluate heart function. The test will tell your doctor and you about your heart and heart valve function. Another test of heart function involves injecting a very small amount of radioactive material into your blood to produce images of your heart. This test is frequently called a radionuclide or MUGA scan.

It is important to know your heart function, because it is one way to determine the severity of your heart failure. It also helps guide your care. However, once your doctor has evaluated your heart function, it is not necessary to keep testing it.



Learn More

You can learn more about how to take control of your heart failure by reading the other modules in this series. You can get copies of these modules from your doctor or nurse. Or you can visit the Heart Failure Society of America web site at: www.hfsa.org.

The topics covered in the other modules include:

- How to Follow a Low-Sodium Diet
- Heart Failure Medicines
- Self-Care: Following Your Treatment Plan and Dealing with Your Symptoms
- Exercise and Activity
- Managing Feelings About Heart Failure
- Tips for Family and Friends
- Lifestyle Changes: Managing Other Chronic Conditions
- Advance Care Planning
- Heart Rhythm Problems
- How to Evaluate Claims of New Heart Failure Treatments and Cures

These modules are not intended to replace regular medical care. You should see your doctor or nurse regularly. The information in these modules can help you work better with your doctor or nurse.

Notes:

