

# Living With Congestive Heart Failure

## What is congestive heart failure (CHF)?

Despite how it sounds, the term “heart failure” simply means your heart isn’t pumping blood as well as it should. Heart failure doesn’t mean your heart has stopped working. “Congestive” means fluid is building up in your body because your heart isn’t pumping correctly.

## What causes CHF?

Any disease that affects the heart and interferes with the circulation can lead to heart failure. Some of the most common causes of CHF include the following:

- Coronary artery disease
- Heart attack
- Congenital heart disease
- Problems with the heart muscle
- High blood pressure
- Problems with heart valves
- Abnormal heart rhythm
- Toxic substances (such as alcohol abuse)

## What are some of the symptoms of CHF?

Call your doctor if you have any of these symptoms, especially if you have had heart problems before.

- Shortness of breath when walking or climbing stairs
- Shortness of breath when lying flat
- Waking up breathless in the night
- Feeling tired or weak
- Swelling of the legs (usually feet or ankles)
- Swelling of the neck veins
- Rapid weight gain (1 or 2 pounds a day for three days in a row)
- Chronic cough

## What tests will I have?

Your doctor will probably suspect CHF based on your medical history, your symptoms and a physical exam. He or she might also order some of the following tests:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Chest x-ray
- Electrocardiogram (monitoring of your heartbeat; also called EKG or ECG)
- Echocardiography (sound waves are used to produce pictures of the heart)
- Radionuclide ventriculography (a substance is injected into your bloodstream to help produce pictures of the heart)

### **What treatment will I need?**

Much can be done to improve the heart's pumping ability and treat the symptoms of CHF, but CHF can't be completely cured. An important element of treatment is taking care of the underlying problems, such as high blood pressure. Treatment also includes lifestyle changes and medicine. Your doctor may recommend the following changes:

- **Eat a healthy diet** - you will probably need to reduce the amount of salt you eat and maybe make other changes in your diet.
- **Avoid alcohol** - you may have to drink less alcohol or stop drinking it completely.
- **Lose weight** - if you're overweight, your doctor will probably recommend that you shed some pounds.
- **Exercise** - your doctor will help you determine how much and what kind of exercise you can do.
- **Smoking** - If you smoke, you will need to quit.

Lifestyle changes can be difficult to make, so get help from your family. You may also find support by talking with other people who have similar heart problems. Your doctor can give you information about these support groups.

### **What medicines will I need to take?**

Many different medicines are used to treat CHF. You may need more than one medicine, depending on your symptoms. It might take a while to find the best medicine for you and the best amount of it. You also may have to change medicines if you have side effects. The most common medicines used to treat CHF include the following:

- **ACE inhibitors.** ACE inhibitors help dilate (open) your arteries and lower your blood pressure, improving blood flow.
- **Diuretics.** Often called "water pills," diuretics make you urinate more often and help keep fluid from building up in your body. They can also decrease fluid that collects in your lungs, which helps you breathe easier.
- **Beta blockers.** Beta blockers can improve blood flow and may help prevent some heart rhythm problems.
- **Digoxin.** Also called digitalis, digoxin helps the heart pump better. It may be combined with other medicines.

When you are taking medicine for CHF, you will need to have blood tests to check your potassium level and kidney function. How often you need blood tests depends on the kind of medicine you take and how much you take. If you have any side effects or concerns, talk to your doctor. To get the most benefit from your medicine, it's important to take it on time and exactly as your doctor says.

### **How often will I need to see my doctor?**

At first, you may need to be seen as often as once a week to check how you're reacting to your medicine. Once your doctor has made sure your medicine is right for you and you're feeling better, you may need to be seen less often.

### **When should I call my doctor?**

You should call your doctor if you are short of breath or have swelling in your ankles or feet. You should also call if you gain three to five pounds in one or two days. (To keep track of your weight, weigh yourself each day when you get up in the morning after urinating but before you eat anything.) You should also call your doctor if you have any questions about your condition or about your medicine.