

Heart Failure

There are many steps you can take to feel better and improve your health if you have heart failure. Medicine and lifestyle changes can slow heart failure in some people.

Learning all you can about your condition can help you get the best results from your treatment.

What is heart failure and what causes it?

Heart failure occurs when your heart does not pump as much blood as your body needs. Failure does not mean that the heart has stopped pumping. It means it is not pumping as well as it should.

Anything that damages the heart and its ability to pump can lead to heart failure. This includes coronary artery disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, heart valve problems, and diabetes.

You may not know you have heart failure until you have had it for a while. This is because your heart and body can make up for the lower amount of blood being pumped to your body.

In time, you are likely to have symptoms, such as feeling weak, lightheaded, and very tired. Fluid builds up in your lungs and other parts of your body. This causes you to be short of breath and have swelling in your body.

What are the types of heart failure?

Ask your doctor what type of heart failure you have. Most people get heart failure because of a problem with the heart's left lower chamber (ventricle).



- When the left ventricle cannot pump well, it is called **heart failure with reduced ejection fraction**, or systolic heart failure.
- When the left ventricle cannot fill properly, it is called **heart failure with preserved ejection fraction**, or diastolic heart failure. The ventricle pumps well, but it pumps out less blood than normal.

What increases your risk for heart failure?

Heart failure is generally caused by another disease, such as coronary artery disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Anything that increases your risk for getting one of those diseases also adds to your risk, or is a risk factor, for heart failure.

Some risks that you cannot control include:

- Your age. The risk of developing heart failure rises sharply as you age.
- Your family history. If any of your close relatives have or had heart failure, you may have inherited a risk for heart failure.

You may be able to control many things that increase your risk for heart failure. Examples include:

- Using tobacco. Smoking increases your risk of heart disease.
- Drinking large amounts of alcohol, which can raise your blood pressure, trigger uneven heartbeats, and damage your heart muscle.
- Not getting enough physical activity. Lack of exercise can increase your risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high blood sugar levels.
- Not eating heart-healthy foods. This may lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol.

Having a risk factor does not mean that you will develop heart disease. Even if you have no risk factors, you still may develop heart failure.

How is heart failure treated?

Heart failure is treated with medicines, a heart-healthy lifestyle, and the steps you take to check your symptoms. Treatment can slow the disease, help you feel better, and help keep you out of the hospital. Treatment may also help you live longer.

Your doctor will recommend a heart-healthy lifestyle.

- **Eat less sodium.** This helps keep fluid from building up. It may help you feel better.

- **Get regular exercise**, which will help keep your heart healthy.
- **Lose weight** if you are overweight. Even small changes can make a difference.
- **Don't smoke.**
- **Limit or avoid alcohol.** Ask your doctor how much, if any, is safe. If you think you might have a problem with alcohol or drug use, talk to your doctor.
- **Manage other health problems.** These include high blood pressure and diabetes.
- **Limit your fluid intake** if your doctor advises it.

Ask your doctor if a cardiac rehab program is right for you. Rehab can give you education and support that help you learn self-care and build new healthy habits, such as exercise.

You may choose palliative care to help improve your quality of life.

Some people get a heart device, such as a pacemaker or implantable cardioverter-defibrillator (ICD).

If heart failure gets worse, you may have other options such as a ventricular assist device or a heart transplant. You can do advance care planning to decide what kind of care you want at the end of your life.