

# Heart Failure

## Frequently Asked Questions

Heart failure is a lifelong condition, but there is a lot that you and your care team can do to help you feel better and slow the disease.

### What does heart failure mean? (Is my heart failing me?)

If you're like most people, you probably agree that the term "heart failure" is pretty lousy. In fact, it can be downright scary. Heart failure is serious, but it does not mean that your heart has stopped working.

Your heart is a pump. Its job is to move oxygen-rich blood and nutrients through your body. With heart failure, it no longer pumps as well as it should. That means it's not keeping up with your body's demands, which is why you can quickly tire, feel weak or out of breath.

Your heart muscle has either become:

- **Weaker** - it can't pump enough blood out to the rest of the body with enough squeeze power
- **Stiffer** - it can't fill with enough blood

Sometimes because of heart failure, fluid can build up in the body too, which can be very dangerous. **The good news is that there is a lot you can do to feel better.** Many of the treatments that are used to manage heart failure help to reduce the workload on your heart.

### Can my heart failure be improved?

Sometimes. By working together with your care team, letting them know your needs and following your care plan, things can get better. Many patients say it also helps to have a good support system and positive outlook.

Similar to other chronic health conditions such as diabetes or asthma, heart failure requires ongoing monitoring and management. It's very important for you to take an active role in your care right from the start, even if you are unsure of all the steps that are needed.

**Treatment can help you feel better, live longer, and avoid hospital stays.**



### What top things can I do to help manage my heart failure?

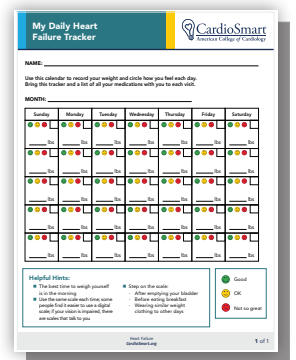


**Take your medications as directed.**



**Stay in tune with your body.** Pay attention to signs that your heart failure may be getting worse. Make a point to check in with yourself to gauge how you are feeling. For example, if you are more winded or tired than usual, or if you notice any swelling or quick weight gain.

Record your symptoms and how you are getting along each day so that your care team knows how best to help you. You can also download and post **My Daily Heart Failure Tracker** to note your daily weight and generally how you feel.



**Limit salt (sodium).** Make sure you understand how little salt you can actually have each day. Salt makes it harder for the body to get rid of excess water. Only a small part of the sodium in our diets comes from what we add. Much of it is already “hiding” in our food.



**Stay active.** Exercise improves symptoms related to heart failure.



**Treat other health problems,** like diabetes and high blood pressure.



**Follow healthy habits.** For example, limit alcohol, do not use tobacco and get to and keep a healthy weight.



**Advocate for yourself.** It’s also really important to share any concerns with your health care team so they don’t get in the way of you doing what is needed to manage the condition. Speak up if, for example, you are worried about:

- The cost or side effects of your medications
- Getting to or paying for follow up visits or tests
- Having a safe place to exercise or being able to afford healthy food options

Always let your team know if you need more support or if you are worried about how heart failure might affect your ability to work, care for children or take part in other activities. Your health providers want to help you in every way possible, and they need to know how best to do so!

#### **What activities should I avoid?**

Ask your care team. You may find that heavy lifting and bending over are not easy to do. Mostly, use common sense, and rest or pull back if you need to.

#### **Should this affect my sex life?**

Not really. Vascular disease and beta-blockers can have effects, so talk with your care team if you have concerns.

#### **What's the average number of medications a person with heart failure has to take?**

More than 6 medications overall, and over 10 doses a day. Talk with your care team if you need help sorting your medications. Pill boxes can help, as can taking medications along with your usual routine (breakfast, when you brush your teeth, etc.).

#### **What's the average life expectancy once diagnosed with heart failure?**

It depends on many factors. It's a good conversation to have with your care team because every person is different.