

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Heart failure: how can I help myself?

It can be very frightening to hear your doctor talk about heart failure. It is a serious condition, but it doesn't mean that your heart is about to stop working or that you're about to die. There are good treatments that can help, and many people live with heart failure for many years. That makes it especially important to look after yourself and do everything you can to stay healthy.

What can I do?

If you have heart failure, there are lots of things you can do to feel better, stay healthier, and keep out of hospital. You might like to ask a friend or family member to help you with some of these things.

Make sure you take your tablets

For people with heart failure, one of the most common causes of ending up in hospital is not taking their medicine. You may have lots of tablets and forget when you need to take them. Or you may not like the side effects.

If you do have problems taking your medicine, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to give you long-acting tablets that you don't need to take as often. Or there may be a different drug or a lower dose that can prevent side effects.

You may find it easier to remember your tablets if you take them at the same time each day, say with meals. You could try writing a timetable of what you need to take and when. Or you can get pill boxes with separate compartments for the medicines you need to take at different times.

Stop smoking

If you smoke, one of the most important things you can do is stop. You may find it hard, but stopping can help you feel less short of breath and make you healthier overall. It may also help prevent coughs and chest infections, which can make your heart failure worse.

The research shows that it's easier to stop smoking if you get help from a doctor. There are several treatments that can help you, but you'll still need willpower. You can buy nicotine patches or gum from a pharmacy. Or you can get drugs, such as bupropion (brand name Zyban) or varenicline (Champix), from your doctor. Drugs aren't suitable for everyone. Talk to your doctor about whether these treatments are right for you.

Lots of people find it easier to stop smoking if they pick a date and stick to it. But don't give up hope if you don't stop first time. Lots of people try several times and succeed in the end.

Heart failure: how can I help myself?

Weigh yourself regularly

Heart failure can cause your body to hold on to too much water. The easiest way to check for this is to weigh yourself regularly. Your doctor or nurse will tell you how often you need to weigh yourself.

If you put on more than 2 kilograms (4 pounds) in three days or less, it may be because there's too much water in your body. If you do notice sudden weight gain, talk to your doctor. He or she may need to alter your medicine.

Cut down on salt

Salt encourages your body to hold on to water. This can be harmful if you have heart failure, so it's a good idea to cut down. For healthy people, doctors advise no more than about 6 grams of salt a day. That's about a teaspoon. Your doctor may suggest you try to eat even less than this.

Food without salt can seem to have less taste until you get used to it. When you cook at home, you can use onions, shallots, garlic, ginger, chilli, herbs, lemon, lime, wine, vinegar, or black pepper to add flavour without using salt.

There's a lot of salt in processed and convenience foods, such as breakfast cereals, tinned foods, stock cubes, ready meals, fast food, and biscuits. So if you can cut down on these, it's half the battle.

You may see "low-salt" salt substitutes in supermarkets. Talk to your doctor before you try these. They usually contain potassium instead of salt. Some drugs for heart failure affect the amount of potassium in your body, and getting too much can be harmful.

Get your flu and pneumonia vaccines

Flu and pneumonia are more dangerous for people with heart failure. Your doctor will probably recommend you get vaccinated against these diseases.

You have these vaccines as injections. You'll need a new flu vaccine every year, but you'll need the pneumonia vaccine only once. Your arm might feel a bit sore where the needle goes in, but these vaccines don't usually cause serious side effects. They can't give you flu or pneumonia. But if you're allergic to eggs, you shouldn't have the flu vaccine. That's because it's made using eggs.

Drink alcohol in moderation

For most people with heart failure, it's fine to drink alcohol as long as they don't have too much. The exception is if your doctor has told you that your heart failure was caused by alcohol. If so, it's better not to drink at all. Ask your doctor what's best for you.

Alcohol can increase the effects of a drug called warfarin. If you're taking warfarin, ask your doctor whether it's safe to drink.

Heart failure: how can I help myself?

Lose weight if you need to

If you're overweight and you have heart failure, it's a good idea to lose weight. This can reduce the strain on your heart and help you be healthier overall.

Your doctor, nurse, or dietitian can give you advice on a healthy diet and losing weight. It's best to take things fairly slowly. You should aim to lose about 0.5 kilograms to 1 kilogram (1 to 2 pounds) each week.

There are lots of different diets and ways of losing weight. The main thing is to choose one that you'll be able to stick to. Whichever you pick, make sure you keep active and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Many people find it easier to lose weight if they join a group and have other people for support.

Exercise

You may worry that exercise could put a strain on your heart. But research shows that exercise can help you feel better, be less breathless, and even live longer.

Your doctor may recommend a particular exercise programme. But even simple things, like going for a walk a few times a week, can make a difference. It's probably best to pick a kind of exercise that you already enjoy and are comfortable with.

You get the most benefit from exercise that makes your heart beat more quickly. But there's no need to overdo it. Your doctor or nurse can give you advice on how much is safe to do.

Can I live a normal life?

You may have to make some changes to your routine if you have heart failure. But it's a good idea to stay as active as you can, see your friends and family and keep up some leisure activities. You'll need to avoid things that put you under a lot of strain. But if your symptoms are under control, you should be able to lead a fairly normal life.

You'll need to tell your doctor what you do in your job. He or she can help you decide if it will affect your heart failure. If you have a job where you're physically active, you may be able to adapt it to suit you.

Your doctor should be able to advise you about whether you can drive. You'll need to tell the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) about your heart failure. You can call them on 0870 240 0009 between 8 a.m. and 5.30 p.m. on weekdays, or visit their website (<http://www.dvla.gov.uk>).

Some people worry about whether they'll be able to have sex. There's not much research on this, but it's unlikely to be a problem. If you're concerned, you can talk to your doctor. Doctors discuss this with many patients, so you shouldn't feel embarrassed.

If you have problems sleeping because you're short of breath, try using pillows to prop yourself up. Some people with heart failure have to get up and go to the toilet at night. If this bothers you, ask your doctor if it's possible to take your diuretics (tablets that make

Heart failure: how can I help myself?

your body get rid of water) in the morning so they're less likely to cause you to get up at night.

When to call the doctor

It's important that you watch for any changes in your symptoms. If you get a new problem, or any of your symptoms get worse, call your doctor. Things to watch out for include a cough, changes in your weight, shortness of breath when you're resting, trouble sleeping, lack of appetite, or more swelling in your legs than usual.

Chest pain, trouble breathing and feeling as if you're going to pass out can all be signs of an emergency. Call 999 straight away if you get any of these.

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full Conditions of Use for this content <http://besttreatments.bmj.com/btuk/about/12.html>.

BMJ^{Group}