

MaineHealth Learning Community

Practice Improvement Series

Tools of the Trade:

What are Your Patients Using to Manage Their Chronic Conditions? Frequently Asked Questions and Answers Heart Failure

1. What is heart failure?

Heart failure occurs anytime your heart isn't pumping blood as well as it should. Blood and oxygen do not move through your body as well as it should.

2. What causes heart failure? Did my heart "fail"?

Despite the way it sounds, it does not mean that the heart suddenly stopped working. This condition usually develops slowly as the heart muscle weakens and needs to work harder to keep blood flowing through the body. It is caused by damage from heart attacks, high blood pressure, problems with heart valves, damage from an infection or virus in the heart, alcoholism.

3. What is "congestive" heart failure or pulmonary edema?

Heart failure is often not recognized until it is in a more advanced stage, as "congestive" heart failure, or pulmonary edema in which fluid may leak into the lungs, feet, legs, liver, or abdomen causing swelling, difficulty breathing, or bloating in the belly.

4. What do I need to look for? Warning signs ?

Sudden weight gain, swelling in the feet, ankles, or belly, bloating, feeling light-headed, dizzy or faint, shortness of breath, especially when lying down, cough, especially at night.

5. How can I take care of myself?

Weigh yourself everyday at the same time, take all medications as prescribed. Eat no more than 2000 mgs of sodium (salt) per day. Get regular activity asking your doctor how much is right for you. Know the warning signs.

6. When should I call the doctor?

A weight gain of more than 2 lbs in 24 hrs or 5 lbs in 3-4 days may indicate the first sign of a flare-up. Increased swelling in the feet, ankles, hands, or belly. More short of breath or coughing more than usual. Feeling light-headed, dizzy, or faint, or much more tired than usual.

7. What do my medicines do to help me?

You may be on a combination of medicines for your heart failure. These make your heart pump stronger, relax your blood vessels so your heart works better, get rid of extra fluid in your body, slow your heart rate, help control your symptoms, and help make you feel better.

8. Why do I need to exercise?

Regular exercise can help control heart failure by improving blood flow through your body, strengthening muscles so everyday tasks are not so tiring, increase your energy level, helps to manage stress, lose weight and overall feeling of well-being. Always talk with your doctor before starting any exercise as he will know what is best for you.

9. Why can't I have salt?

Salt makes the body hold on to water. This fluid build up causes weight gain making it harder for your heart to work. Limiting the amount that you eat helps to prevent symptoms of heart failure. Most physicians recommend no more than 2000 mgs of sodium per day. Food label reading is very important to assist you to monitor your intake. One teaspoon of salt equals 2400 mgs of sodium.

10. I am so tired, what can I do?

Try to conserve energy for the things that are important to you. Get enough rest, develop a routine, pace yourself, sit when possible, break up larger jobs into smaller tasks, rest when you feel tired, ask for help when needed. Regular activity usually helps increase your energy level.

**** Excerpts were taken from MaineHealth Healing Hearts, Heart Failure Information for Patients and Families