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Harvard Heart Letter

5 Action Steps for Early Heart Failure

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Early heart failure may be mild but can worsen quickly. Learn what you can do to keep symptoms in check.

Heart failure may start with injury from a heart attack, develop as a result of damaged valves, or be brought on by underlying disease. Many times, it is the product of years of toil by the heart against high blood pressure and clogged arteries. Regardless of what sets the process in motion, heart failure culminates in a progressive weakening of your heart's power to pump. Consequently, blood circulates through your heart and body more slowly; your cells thirst for fresh oxygen and nutrients.

Early signs often misdiagnosed

"The symptoms leading up to the diagnosis can be very subtle," says Dr. Eldrin Lewis, a cardiologist at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital. "The onset of the condition is often so slow and insidious that people are commonly misdiagnosed with asthma or allergies, or told they are just out of shape." So consider the possibility of heart failure if you begin to notice shortness of breath—especially if you have a history of high blood pressure or other heart disease. Work closely with your doctor to uncover the cause and start on a treatment plan, adds Dr. Eldrin.



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1 Take your medicines. Most people diagnosed with heart failure need a three-drug regimen: a diuretic to help the body eliminate excess fluid and sodium, an ACE inhibitor or an angiotensin-receptor blocker to relax the blood vessels, and a beta blocker to lower the heart's workload. Not only will taking your medicines as prescribed ease your symptoms and help you stay out of the hospital, some of these drugs can also improve heart function and extend life.

Exercise, weight loss, and a low-sodium diet can help you live a healthy life with early-stage heart failure.

2 Change your diet. When you have heart failure, you need to limit the amount of sodium you consume to 2 grams a day, says Dr. Lewis. "Never add salt to foods you prepare or use the salt shaker at the table, and avoid all salty foods," he says. In addition, you should limit your intake of fluids—meaning anything that pours or melts—to about 2 quarts per day. Closely monitoring sodium and fluids may also help you lower your dose of diuretic medicine.




3 Listen to your body. Call your doctor right away if you notice any new or strange symptoms. "Palpitations, dizzy spells when walking, fainting episodes, worsening shortness of breath, or rapid changes in your weight all may be signs that heart failure is getting out of control," says Dr. Lewis. "Addressing them early can help you avert serious complications that could send you to the hospital."

4 Pay attention to your other medical conditions. People with heart failure can become so focused on the condition that other aspects of their health fall by the wayside, says Dr. Lewis. "I'm particularly sensitive about people keeping blood pressure under adequate control. High blood pressure can lead to a downward spiral with heart failure." He recommends having a blood pressure cuff at home and taking readings daily. "That way, you don't have to wait six months until your next doctor visit to find out that blood pressure levels are going up."

5 Exercise and lose weight if you are overweight. For people with heart failure, regular aerobic exercise is a high priority for two reasons. First, it strengthens your heart and circulatory system so that blood and oxygen move around your body more efficiently.

Second, your ability to exercise can serve as an early warning system to alert you to worsening heart function. "If you were walking a half-mile each day on the treadmill and now you can't go more than a quarter of a mile without getting short of breath, reach out to your doctor," says Dr. Lewis. Although mild strength training exercises are good for maintaining muscle mass, Dr. Lewis cautions against heavy weight lifting, which can overly strain your heart. He advises using 5- or 10-pound weights and doing more repetitions for increased toning. Losing weight can also take stress off your heart. However, as important as exercise is, you can't count on it alone as a weight-loss strategy. Your best bet is to reduce your calorie intake by about 500 calories a day.?

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