Living with heart failure

Information for people with heart failure, and for their family and friends
Produced by
British Heart Foundation
14 Fitzhardinge Street
London W1H 6DH
Phone: 020 7935 0185
Website: www.bhf.org.uk
Registered charity number: 225971

Heart information line: 0845 0 70 80 70 for confidential information on a range of issues relating to heart disease

This booklet is one of the booklets in the Heart Information Series. For a complete list of booklets see page 31.

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About this booklet

This booklet is for people with heart failure, and for their family and friends. It explains:
- what heart failure is
- what causes it
- the symptoms
- how it is diagnosed
- how it is treated, and
- what you can do to have some control over your condition.

This booklet is not a substitute for the advice your doctor or cardiologist (heart specialist) may give you based on his or her knowledge of your condition.
What is heart failure?

Heart failure is the term used when the heart becomes less efficient at pumping blood round the body, either while you are resting or active. The term ‘heart failure’ is unfortunate because it implies that the heart has actually failed. However, many people can have some control over their condition with drugs, surgery or by making changes to their lifestyle.

How a normal heart works

Circulation of the blood is essential as the blood takes nourishment to all your tissues and organs. It also transports waste materials to the lungs and kidneys, which then get rid of them from the body.

The heart has two muscular pumps which act together. Blood from your muscles and organs enters the right side of your heart. The heart pumps the blood to the lungs where it takes up oxygen and removes the carbon dioxide it has been carrying. This oxygen-rich blood then enters the left side of the heart. From here it is pumped through the arteries to all parts of your body including the heart muscle itself.

The movement of the blood through the heart is regulated by a system of valves. These make sure that the blood flows in the correct direction. There are four valves – one at the entrance and one at the exit of each of the two pumping chambers.

The illustration on the next page shows in more detail how a normal heart works, and what happens in a person with heart failure.

What causes heart failure?

Heart failure may result from damage to the heart muscle. The damage is most commonly caused by a heart attack, but sometimes it may be caused by drinking too much alcohol, or by a virus infection, or by a disease of the heart muscle called ‘cardiomyopathy’. In some people the cause of the damage is unknown.

Heart failure can also result from conditions which put an extra workload on the heart. The heart may have coped with this increased workload for many years before heart failure occurs. Problems which can cause an increased workload include:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- anaemia
- heart valves that either leak or are too narrow
- thyroid gland disease, or
- a heart rate that is much too fast, or too slow, or irregular.
How the heart works

Blood from the body passes through the tricuspid valve into the right side of the heart. It is then pumped through the pulmonary valve and then on to the lungs, where it takes up oxygen and removes carbon dioxide.

Oxygen-rich blood from the lungs passes back to the left side of the heart through the mitral valve. It is then pumped through the aortic valve and then on to all parts of the body.

Causes of heart failure

Left side of the heart

The most common causes of heart failure of the left side of the heart are damage to the muscular pump of the left ventricle caused by a heart attack, and diseases of the mitral valve and aortic valve. The symptoms of left heart failure are tiredness and breathlessness.

Right side of the heart

The most common cause of heart failure to the right side of the heart is left heart failure (see above). Right heart failure can also be caused by lung diseases, as these can result in the right ventricle not pumping efficiently, causing the heart to become enlarged, and producing symptoms of right heart failure. The most common symptom of right heart failure is swollen ankles and feet.

We describe all these symptoms in more detail on the next page.