

Let's Talk About Heart Failure

A guide for patients, their families and carers.

This information sheet contains the information from the booklet: "Let's Talk About Heart Failure". The National Heart Foundation of Australia gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the Sunshine Foundation in the preparation of this booklet.

The National Heart Foundation of Australia would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the South Eastern Sydney Area Health Service Heart Failure Booklet Committee and the Cardiomyopathy Association of Australia Ltd in the preparation of the "Let's Talk About Heart Failure" booklet.

To obtain a copy of the booklet please contact Heartline, the Heart Foundation's national telephone information service, on 1300 36 27 87 (local call cost).

Introduction

This information aims to:

- Help you, your family and carer better understand the condition of heart failure.
- Answer some of the common questions asked by people with heart failure.
- Offer guidelines for improving the quality of your life and managing this condition.

Key Messages

- Know about your medications and take them regularly.
- See your doctor regularly and follow all doctor's instructions, including medication advice.
- Restrict your salt intake.
- Monitor your weight.
- Stop smoking.
- Stop or limit alcohol intake.
- Be physically active.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Contact your doctor immediately if there are any changes to your condition.

What is Heart Failure?

Heart failure is an ongoing condition that occurs when the heart muscle works less effectively than normal and cannot pump as well as it usually does. As a result of heart failure the heart may become enlarged or thickened and weaken over time. Your heart will keep pumping but with less efficiency.

How common is Heart Failure?

In Australia, it is estimated that there are over 300,000 people living with heart failure. About 30,000 people are newly diagnosed with this condition each year.

What causes Heart Failure?

The most common causes of heart failure include coronary heart disease, previous heart attack, high blood pressure and cardiomyopathy.

The Healthy Heart

The heart is a pump that pushes blood around your body. The right side of the heart collects blood from the rest of the body and sends it to the lungs where it collects oxygen.

From the lungs the blood is returned to the left side of the heart where it is then pushed out to deliver oxygen to the rest of the body.

Heart Failure Symptoms

| Symptom | Usual Cause | Suggestions to Help |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Shortness of breath | There could be excess fluid in the lungs. | You may get short of breath when doing physical activity. Discuss this with your doctor if this is a worry to you. If shortness of breath interrupts sleep, extra pillows may make breathing easier. If this is a problem, see your doctor. |
| Ankle swelling | Fluid leaks out of the blood vessels into the tissues. This is called oedema. | If your weight increases by more than 1.5kgs in one day, restrict your fluid intake and contact your doctor or heart failure nurse immediately. |
| Weight gain | Fluid build up may cause weight gain. 1 litre fluid = 1 kilogram weight. You lose weight as you lose fluid. | You need to weigh yourself every day. If you put on more than 1.5kgs in one day, restrict your fluids and contact your doctor or heart failure nurse immediately. |
| Tiredness | You could tire easily as the result of less blood going to the major organs and muscles. | Plan your day. Don't forget to rest when you need to. Ask for help with any heavy work, if you cannot avoid it. |
| Loss of appetite | This may be due to a build up of fluid in the digestive organs, which gives you a "full" feeling. | You may wish to eat smaller meals more often. |
| Dizziness | There is less blood than normal going to the brain. | If dizziness continues, contact your doctor. If you faint or feel very dizzy, seek help as soon as possible. |
| Heart palpitations | May be due to: – an increased awareness of your normal heart rhythm; – feeling your heart beating faster than usual; or – an abnormal heart rhythm. | If you are feeling dizzy, stop and rest until your symptoms ease. If symptoms persist, contact your doctor. |

| Symptom | Usual Cause | Suggestions to Help |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Chest pain | Chest pain is not a usual symptom of heart failure but if your heart is not getting enough blood you may experience temporary chest pain, tightness or discomfort known as angina (see glossary on page 8). Chest pain, which feels worse when you breathe in, may be due to a lung infection, or a blood clot in the lungs. | If you are having chest pains or discomfort you will need to rest and take your angina medication such as 'anginine' tablets or GTN spray as prescribed. If chest pain is not relieved, repeat the dose of medication in 5 minutes. If the pain is not completely relieved within 10 to 15 minutes by medication and rest, regard it as a possible heart attack and dial 000 for an ambulance immediately. The best response may differ in rural areas. |
| Dry irritating cough | This may be due to congestion of the lungs. It may also be due to commonly used drugs called ACE Inhibitors. | Contact your doctor if your cough persists. |

Living with Heart Failure

The treatment for heart failure can be divided into two main categories: *Medications* and *Lifestyle Changes*. Both are very important to help you to live life to its fullest potential and remain out of hospital.

Restricting your salt and alcohol intake, being physically active and not smoking will help you to keep healthy and reduce the potential for further damage to your heart.

Medications

There are many different types of medications for heart failure. If you feel your medicine is not working, is causing you problems or you have any questions **please discuss this with your doctor**. Your pharmacist can also tell you more about your medicine.

Important things to remember

- The names of each of the medications that you are taking.
- The correct doses of the medications and when you should be taking them.
- What the medications do.
- What the possible side effects are.

Never stop taking your medication without discussing with your doctor. ALWAYS ensure you have enough medication at all times.

Types of Medication

| Medication | Example | How it works | Side effects can include |
|----------------------|--|---|--|
| ACE Inhibitors | Captopril Lisinopril Perindopril Enalapril Ramipril Fosinopril Quinopril | Block the effects of important hormones, dilate blood vessels and reduces the heart's workload. | Dry, persistent cough; nausea, dizziness. |
| Beta Blockers | Carvedilol Metoprolol Bisoprolol | Blocks the effect of nerves that act on the heart and other parts of the body. Reduces heart rate and lowers blood pressure, thereby reducing the workload placed on the heart. | Dizziness, wheezing, tiredness, increased shortness of breath. |
| Diuretic | Frusamide Thiazide Spironolactone | Helps to rid the body of excess fluid. | Dizziness, nausea, skin rash. |
| Potassium supplement | 'Slow K' | Maintains the normal potassium level, which can be lost when taking some diuretics. | Rarely causes gastric upset. |
| Digitalis | Digoxin | Helps the heart to pump more efficiently and regulates an irregular rhythm. | Nausea, vomiting, altered vision, heart rhythm problems. |
| Anti-coagulant | Warfarin | Thins the blood to prevent clotting. You will need regular blood tests to monitor this. | Bleeding, bruising. |
| Anti-arrhythmics | Amiodarone Sotolol | Helps to control the heart's rhythm. | For amiodarone; sensitivity to the sun, alteration of liver function tests, overactive or underactive thyroid. |

Managing Your Lifestyle

Restrict your salt intake

Salt causes the body to retain fluid. This means that it is very important not to add salt to your food at the table or during cooking, and to eat low salt foods.

To reduce salt intake:

- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- When shopping, check the labels of foods and choose products low in salt (containing less than 120mg of sodium per 100g serve).
- Avoid highly salted seasonings, processed foods and takeaway foods that are high in salt.
- Use garlic, herbs and spices instead of salt.
- Avoid adding salt during cooking or at the table.

Monitor your weight

You need to weigh yourself EVERY day. Try and weigh yourself at the same time each morning. In this way it will become part of your daily routine.

Step 1. Wake up.

Step 2. Go to the toilet.

Step 3. Weigh yourself, with the same type of clothing on.

Step 4. Write down your weight in your notebook.

Your doctor may also recommend that you restrict your fluid intake. Typically this could be from 1 to 1.5 litres per day.

**Remember: Weight gain often means that fluid is building up in the body.
1kg weight = 1 litre body fluid.**

If you are overweight, losing weight will lower the workload of your heart and may help you to become more active. Ask your doctor or dietitian for help.

There are other aspects related to healthy eating. For further information call Heartline on 1300 36 27 87 (local call cost) for copies of 'Get the Good Eating Habit', 'Healthy Eating for the Heart' and other health eating information.

Limit your alcohol intake

Alcohol can damage your heart and you should discuss this with your doctor. You may be asked to stop or reduce your drinking. It is very important not to drink more than 1 to 2 standard drinks of alcohol per day. If your heart failure has been caused by alcohol you should stop drinking altogether.

Quit smoking

Smoking reduces the amount of oxygen in your blood, and damages the walls of the arteries. Stopping smoking is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your risk of further heart disease. For information on and support with quitting smoking contact your doctor or call the QUITLINE on 131 848 (24 hours).

Physical activity

Regular light to moderate physical activity, such as walking, exercise bicycling, lifting light weights and stretching is important. Try to be active every day. Talk to your doctor about the type and level that is suitable for you. Do what you can without getting breathless or over tired – you should be able to talk easily doing physical activity. Avoid strenuous activities unless your doctor has approved them.

Cardiac rehabilitation

Cardiac rehabilitation helps people, with heart disease, to learn more about heart disease, how to manage it and reduce any further risk. Cardiac rehabilitation programs provide patients and their families with education, information, physical activity and support. The World Health Organisation and the National Heart Foundation of Australia, recommend that all patients who have heart disease should be routinely referred to an appropriate cardiac rehabilitation and prevention program. For details about your closest cardiac rehabilitation program, call Heartline on 1300 36 27 87.

When should I contact my doctor?

- If you increase your weight by 1.5kg or more in one day.
- If you are short of breath and are NOT exercising at the time.
- If you have asthma and need your medication more than normal.
- If your heart is beating very fast.
- If you are very dizzy or if you pass out.
- If your angina is getting worse.
- If there is increased swelling in your ankles, legs or abdomen.
- If you have a high temperature, are shivering or are confused.
- If you are coughing a lot – especially at night.
- If you are more tired than usual.
- If you have redness, swelling or tenderness of your joints.
- If you have any serious side effects from your medication.
- When you need to get prescriptions for your medications.

When do I call an ambulance?

Dial 000 to **call an ambulance** if you have:

- Chest pain, tightness or discomfort that lasts longer than 10 to 15 minutes, and which has not been totally relieved in that time after taking your angina medication (e.g. 'anginine' tablets or GTN spray under the tongue); or
- Severe shortness of breath.

Or if any of your symptoms are causing distress **call an ambulance on 000**.

Commonly Asked Questions

What tests will I need?

Your doctor will tell you what tests are required. If you would like to know more about these tests and their results, contact your doctor.

Some of the tests include:

- Echocardiogram
- Electrocardiogram
- Chest X-ray
- Coronary Angiogram

(See glossary at the back of this information sheet for more information.)

Can an operation fix my heart?

Sometimes a heart transplant or other procedure may be considered. Coronary artery bypass surgery or angioplasty may be recommended if you have coronary artery narrowing.

Can I travel on an aeroplane or on a long trip?

Usually this is not a problem, **but** remember:

- Talk with your doctor before your trip. Your medication may need to be adjusted.
- Do not miss taking any of your medication.
- Ask a travelling companion to remind you when to take your medication.
- On long flights, remember to stretch your legs and ankles and wear support stockings.

Why do I have to limit the amount of salt I eat?

Salt causes the body to retain fluid. The extra fluid can build up and cause symptoms and can put added strain on the heart.

Why have I been asked to weigh myself every day?

It is important to monitor your weight daily so that you know if you are retaining excess fluid. Your weight can be used to monitor your treatment. You should contact your doctor or heart failure nurse if your weight increases by more than 1.5kg in 24 hours.

Why do I get so tired?

Often this is because there is less blood and oxygen being pumped to your muscles and other parts of the body.

Why are my ankles/feet swollen?

This is due to excess fluid in your body. It accumulates in your ankles or feet due to gravity.

I find it hard to complete daily activities, so how do I do exercise as well?

Planning your daily activities to allow for rest periods will help you to complete your tasks and enable you to include some physical activity as well. Short periods of activity followed by a rest period will enable you to complete more over a longer period of time.

What happens if I miss a dose of my medications?

Do not take a double dose of the medication. Depending on when you realise that you have missed a dose, it is often best to just wait and take the next regular dose of the medication. If in doubt about what to do, contact your doctor for advice.

What foods should I limit?

Avoid highly salted seasonings, processed foods and takeaway foods that are high in salt. When shopping, check the labels of food and choose products low in salt (containing less than 120mg of sodium per 100g serve).

Will I ever be cured of chronic heart failure?

In most cases chronic heart failure is a condition that cannot be cured completely but lifestyle changes and medications can bring about some improvement, relieve your symptoms and help prevent further deterioration.

Why do I get short of breath when I lie down, as well as when I am being active?

This is due to a build up of fluid in the lungs. The heart is unable to remove this fluid as efficiently as it used to.

Can I still have sex?

Yes. If you become short of breath or have any chest pain you may need to stop and rest, or find a position that will not put as much strain on the heart. If you can walk up two flights of steps without symptoms, then having sex is likely to be safe. Males are often affected by impotence. If this occurs, talk to your doctor.

Are there any support groups for people with chronic heart failure?

There are several support groups including the Cardiomyopathy Association and Heart Support Australia. Contact Heartline on 1300 36 27 87 for details of the group nearest to you.

Where can I get more information about chronic heart failure?

The Heart Foundation provides a telephone information service. For the cost of a local call you can contact Heartline for information on heart failure and support groups. The number is 1300 36 27 87. Your GP, cardiologist and heart failure nurse will also be able to provide you with further information.

Glossary

Angina: Angina is temporary chest pain or discomfort resulting from a reduced blood supply to the heart muscle. It occurs because part of the heart is temporarily unable to get enough blood and oxygen to meet its needs.

Angina usually occurs when the heart has to work harder than usual, when its requirements for blood and oxygen are increased. This can happen, for example, during exercise or effort, or when upset. The pain usually feels tight, gripping or squeezing, can vary from mild to very severe, and may be also felt, or only felt, in the arm(s), neck or jaw. Many people, however, do not feel pain, just an unpleasant sensation or discomfort in the chest. Angina is usually relieved by rest and medication.

Cardiomyopathy: A condition associated with weakening of the heart muscle. The cause in most cases is unknown, but it can be the result in some cases from a previous viral infection or excessive alcohol intake.

Chest X-ray: A picture that shows the heart, lungs and ribs.

Coronary Angiogram: A test in which a small tube (catheter) is inserted into an artery in the arm or leg and guided towards the heart. Dye is injected into the coronary arteries and the heart chambers. Pictures are taken as the dye moves through the heart, coronary arteries and chambers.

Coronary Angioplasty: A technique that improves the blood flow to the heart by using a special balloon to open a blocked artery at the point of narrowing.

After angioplasty, a stent, which is an expandable metal tube (such as a coil or wire mesh), is usually placed at the newly opened part of the artery and expanded. The expanded stent is left in place to keep the artery open.

Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery: This operation allows the blood flow to bypass the narrowed areas in the coronary arteries so that the blood can easily get to the heart muscle.

Echocardiogram: This test uses ultrasound waves that come from a small hand piece placed on the chest wall which bounce back to produce a picture of the heart's chambers and valves.

Electrocardiogram: Leads are placed on the chest wall, arms and legs to produce a picture on graph paper illustrating the electrical impulses travelling through the heart muscle.

Heart Attack: A heart attack is typically caused by a blood clot that suddenly blocks a narrowed artery, cutting the blood supply to the heart muscle. This can result in heart muscle damage.

For more information call the Heart Foundation's national telephone information service, Heartline, on 1300 36 27 87 (for the cost of a local call).

February 2003