

Living with Heart Failure: Exercising Safely

Being physically active every day is an important part of your heart failure treatment plan.

Exercise and activity will help strengthen your heart and may reduce your symptoms. But you need to make sure you do it safely.

Talk to your healthcare provider about a physical activity goal that you can gradually work toward today.

They may want you to take a test to measure your “peak exercise capacity”.

In this test you will be asked to exercise while wearing a few items to monitor your heart, oxygen and carbon dioxide levels.

The results of this and possibly other tests can help your healthcare provider identify the best ways for you to exercise and be active.

Start slowly. Your body needs to adjust to being more active. When you start to feel too tired, stop and rest.

If you do too much too soon you may increase your heart failure symptoms, like shortness of breath. That can scare you, and make you want to give up.

Set small goals that you can reach.

For example, your goal may be to gradually work up to at least 20 minutes of physical activity each day.

For some people this may take longer than for others.

Remember, if you feel tired, you need to rest. Don't overdo it.

“I just can't walk a long way or real fast, and then I just sit down and rest and catch my breath and then I can go again.”

One way to monitor how hard you are working is to use the perceived level of exertion scale.

This scale goes from 0 to 10 with 0 representing no effort and 10 representing extreme exhaustion.

Discuss your exercise goals with your cardiac care team. Your goals will change as your symptoms improve.

Signs that you are doing too much include:

A very rapid heart rate, severe shortness of breath, chest pain, extreme tiredness, nausea, and dizziness.

If you notice any of these signs, stop exercising immediately. If they do not go away with rest, contact your healthcare team.

Be aware on days that are too hot, you may need to rest more frequently...

Or you can exercise inside, stay out of the heat, and stay active.

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Your healthcare provider may recommend cardiac rehabilitation. Here you can work with a trainer or therapist to help reach your activity goals and monitor your cardiac status including heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen levels.

Remember, whatever exercise you choose, you can be physically active almost anytime and anywhere: outside, in the gym, at home, or in classes with other heart failure patients.

Find an activity that works for you....

"We dance a lot."

"Like she said, that's probably our favorite form, because you're getting that cardio workout and you don't realize you're getting it, because you're into the music and into what's going on and..."

"It's not forced."

"Right. And we enjoy it. It's good for the mind and a good release for us."

Talk with your healthcare provider about other ways to safely add exercise and activity to your daily life.

Exercising safely and being active will help your heart get stronger and help you feel better overall.