
Discharge Instructions for Heart Failure

The heart is a muscle that pumps oxygen-rich blood to all parts of the body. When you have heart failure, the heart is not able to pump as well as it should. Blood and fluid may back up into the lungs. Some parts of the body don't get enough oxygen-rich blood to work normally. These problems lead to the symptoms of heart failure. Heart failure can occur because of an injury to the heart or from natural processes. You can control symptoms of heart failure with some lifestyle changes and by following your doctor's advice.

Activity

Ask your healthcare provider about an exercise program. Simple activities such as walking or gardening can help. Exercising most days of the week can make you feel better. Don't be discouraged if your progress is slow at first. Rest as needed. Stop activity if you get symptoms such as chest pain, lightheadedness, or shortness of breath. Find activities that you enjoy. Examples might be brisk walking, dancing, swimming, and gardening. These will help you stay active and strengthen your heart. Ask your healthcare provider about cardiac rehab. This is a program that helps you to exercise safely.

Diet

Follow a heart healthy diet. And make sure to limit the salt (sodium) in your diet. Salt causes your body to hold water. This makes your heart work harder because there is more fluid for the heart to pump. Limit your salt as directed by your healthcare provider by doing the following:

- Limit canned, dried, packaged, and fast foods.
- Don't add salt to your food.
- Season foods with herbs instead of salt.
- Watch how much liquids you drink. Drinking too much can make heart failure worse. Talk with your healthcare provider about how much you should drink each day.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. It may harm your heart. Women should have no more than 1 drink a day. Men should have no more than 2 a day.
- Ask that your meals have no added salt when you eat out.
- Talk with your healthcare provider before using salt substitutes. They often have potassium in them. This may not be good for your health. This will depend on how well your kidneys are working and what medicines you're taking. Some people need extra potassium. Others don't.

Tobacco

It's important to quit if you smoke. Smoking increases your chances of having a heart attack by harming the blood vessels that provide oxygen to your heart. This makes heart failure worse. Quitting smoking is the number one thing you can do to improve your health. Enroll in a stop-smoking program to improve your chances of success. Talk with

your healthcare provider about medicines or nicotine replacement therapy. Also ask your healthcare provider about smoking cessation support groups.

Medicine

Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Learn the names and purpose of each of your medicines. Keep an accurate medicine list and current dosages with you at all times. Don't skip doses. If you miss a dose of your medicine, take it as soon as you remember. If you miss a dose and it's almost time for your next dose, just wait and take your next dose at the normal time. Don't take a double dose. If you are unsure, call your doctor's office. Make sure not to mix up your medicines or forget what you've taken the same day. Refill your prescriptions before you run out of medicine. Talk with your healthcare provider if you have trouble with the cost of your medicines.

Weight monitoring

Weigh yourself every day. A sudden weight gain can mean your heart failure is getting worse. Weigh yourself at the same time of day and in the same kind of clothes. Ideally, weigh yourself first thing in the morning after you empty your bladder, but before you eat breakfast. Your healthcare provider will show you how to track your weight. They will also tell you when you should call if you have a sudden, unexpected increase in your weight.

In general, your healthcare provider may ask you to report if your weight goes up by more than 2 pounds in 1 day, 5 pounds in 1 week, or whatever weight gain you were told by your doctor. This is a sign that you are retaining more fluid than you should be. Clues to weight gain include checking your ankles for swelling, or noticing you are short of breath when you lie down.

Follow-up care

Have a follow-up appointment as instructed. Depending on the type and severity of heart failure you have, you may need follow-up within 7 days from hospital discharge. Keep appointments for checkups and lab tests that are needed to check your medicines and condition.

Recognize that your health and even survival depend on you following your provider's advice.

Symptoms

Heart failure can cause a variety of symptoms. They include:

- Shortness of breath
- Trouble breathing at night, especially when you lie down
- Swelling in the legs and feet or in the belly (abdomen)
- Becoming easily tired
- Irregular or rapid heartbeat
- Weakness or lightheadedness

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- Swelling of the neck veins

It's important to know what to do if symptoms get worse or if you develop signs of worsening heart failure. Keep track of how you feel each day. Report any changes to your healthcare provider.

When to call your healthcare provider

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of these signs of worsening heart failure:

- Sudden weight gain. This means more than 2 pounds in 1 day or 5 pounds in 1 week, or whatever weight gain you were told to report by your doctor.
- Trouble breathing not related to being active
- New or increased swelling of your legs or ankles
- Swelling or pain in your abdomen
- Breathing trouble at night. This means waking up short of breath or needing more pillows to breathe.
- Frequent coughing that doesn't go away
- Feeling much more tired than usual

Call 911

Call 911 right away if you have:

- Severe shortness of breath, such that you can't catch your breath even while resting
- Severe chest pain that does not resolve with rest or nitroglycerin
- Pink, foamy mucus with cough and shortness of breath
- An ongoing rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Passing out or fainting
- Stroke symptoms such as sudden numbness or weakness on one side of your face, arm, or leg or sudden confusion, trouble speaking or vision changes