

Wellness Articles

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If you would like to be added to the distribution list for these articles, please email: Rebecca.johnson2@albertahealthservices.ca. You will receive a monthly email containing articles for the upcoming four weeks.

An archive of past wellness articles is available at <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/9966.asp>

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What is heart failure?

Heart failure means that your heart muscle doesn't pump as much blood as your body needs. Failure doesn't mean that your heart has stopped. It means that your heart is not pumping as well as it should.

Because your heart cannot pump well, your body tries to make up for it. To do this:

- Your body holds on to salt and water. This increases the amount of blood in your bloodstream.
- Your heart beats faster.
- Your heart may get bigger.

Your body has an amazing ability to make up for heart failure. It may do such a good job that you don't know you have a disease. But at some point, your heart and body will no longer be able to keep up. Then fluid starts to build up in your body, and you have symptoms such as feeling weak and out of breath.

This fluid buildup is called congestion. It's why some doctors call the disease congestive heart failure.

Heart failure usually gets worse over time. But treatment can slow the disease and help you feel better and live longer.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of heart failure start to happen when your heart cannot pump enough blood to the rest of your body. In the early stages, you may:

- Feel tired easily.
- Be short of breath when you exert yourself.

- Feel like your heart is pounding or racing (palpitations).
- Feel weak or dizzy.

As heart failure gets worse, fluid starts to build up in your lungs and other parts of your body. This may cause you to:

- Feel short of breath even at rest.
- Have swelling (edema), especially in your legs, ankles, and feet.
- Gain weight. This may happen over just a day or two, or more slowly.
- Cough or wheeze, especially when you lie down.
- Feel bloated or sick to your stomach.

If your symptoms suddenly get worse, you will need emergency care.

Care at home

Lifestyle changes are an important part of treatment. They can help slow down heart failure. They may also help control other diseases that make heart failure worse, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and coronary artery disease.

The best steps you can take are to:

- Eat less sodium. Sodium causes your body to hold on to water and may make symptoms worse. Your doctor may also ask you to limit how much fluid you drink.
- Get regular exercise. Your doctor can tell you what level of exercise is safe for you, how to check your pulse, and how to know if you are doing too much.
- Take rest breaks during the day.
- Lose weight if you are overweight. Even a few kilograms can make a difference.
- Stop smoking. Smoking damages your heart and makes exercise harder to do.
- Limit alcohol. Ask your doctor how much, if any, is safe.
- Talk to your doctor before you take any new medicine, including non-prescription and prescription drugs, vitamins, and herbs. Some of them may make your heart failure worse.
- Keep track of your symptoms. Weigh yourself at the same time every day, and write down your weight. Call your doctor if you have a sudden weight gain, a change in your ability to exercise, or any sudden change in your symptoms.

Heart failure can get worse suddenly. If this happens, you will need emergency care. To prevent [sudden heart failure](#), you need to avoid things that can trigger it. These include eating too much salt, missing a dose of your medicine, and exercising too hard.

Knowing that your health may get worse can be hard. It is normal to sometimes feel sad or hopeless. But if these feelings last, talk to your doctor or call Health Link at 811. Antidepressant medicines, counselling, or both may help you cope.