CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE

WHAT IS CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE?

Congestive heart failure is a condition in which the heart muscle fails to supply adequate forward blood flow to vital organs. Systolic heart failure results when the heart muscle is weakened by processes such as heart attacks, alcohol abuse, infections, or rare disorders affecting the muscle itself. Diastolic heart failure results when the heart muscle fails to relax properly. Like a spring that stores energy as it is stretched, the heart muscle does the same. When it loses this elasticity, or “springlike” quality, diastolic heart failure results.

Despite its misleading name, "heart failure" does not mean that your heart suddenly stops working. Instead, heart failure develops slowly as your heart muscle gradually weakens. The term "failure" refers to your heart's inability to pump enough blood to meet your body's needs.

As the heart muscle weakens other problems can result:

- The heart’s electrical system can become disrupted. This can lead to sudden cardiac death (SCD). In fact SCD is 6-9 times more common in people with heart failure than in the general population.
- The heart can become enlarged. Your heart tries to work harder since it is not able to pump enough blood. Over time, the heart can grow larger, even though it is weak.
- Not enough blood flows to your body’s tissues. The faster heart rate may make your weakened heart work even harder.
- Not enough blood flows to the kidneys. If your kidneys do not receive enough blood, you may have water retention, swelling (in the legs and feet), and high blood pressure. All of these problems can also cause the heart to work harder.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE?

The causes of heart failure vary from one person to another. The causes have one thing in common - they damage the heart muscle so that it no longer pumps as well as it should. Nearly any form of heart or blood vessel disease can lead to heart failure.

Factors that can cause heart failure include:

- Coronary artery disease (If you have had a heart attack, you are five times more likely to develop heart failure.)
- Hypertension
- Diabetes
- Aging
- Alcohol abuse
- Viral infections
- Heart Valve Disorders
- Thyroid disorders

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An enlarged heart itself can have a number of causes:

- Alcohol or drug abuse
- High blood pressure makes you twice as likely to develop heart failure
- Heart valve disease
- A viral infection in the heart
- A congenital heart problem (present at birth)

In addition, all of the risk factors that you can control (such as eating habits, exercise, and smoking) make a difference in how likely you are to have a heart condition, including heart failure.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

Symptoms of heart failure get worse over time. The most common symptoms include:

- Shortness of breath - this may get worse when you lie down.
- Fatigue - this happens because your muscles aren't getting enough oxygen from your blood.
- Chronic cough - this is due to fluid buildup in the lungs.
- Fluid retention - this happens especially in the legs and feet.

Other symptoms can include heart palpitations. This is a feeling that your heart is racing or that your heartbeat is irregular. Some people also have nausea and lack of appetite, dizziness, fainting spells, or difficulty concentrating.

**WHAT TESTS ARE USED TO DIAGNOSE HEART FAILURE?**

To find out if you have heart failure, your doctor may suggest one or more of the test listed below. The test results can also help your doctor choose the test treatment(s) for you. Tests for patients with the diagnosis of heart failure include:

- Electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG)
- Echocardiogram
- Cardiac catheterization
- Electrophysiology (EP) study
- MRI or CT scan

**WHAT ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR HEART FAILURE?**

**Medical therapy** forms the cornerstone of therapy for heart failure. The standard drug cocktail requires 4-5 essential drugs which are titrated (built up) over 6-12 weeks. These drugs have been shown to improve long term survival in patients with heart failure, although they may not be tolerated by all patients due to side effects. These drugs include:

1. Beta blockers such as carvedilol or metoprolol
2. ACE inhibitors or ARB blockers (lisinopril or losartan)
3. Diuretics
4. Digoxin
5. Aldactone

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Device based therapy may include a defibrillator or resynchronization pacemaker/defibrillator combination. Heart transplantation is another therapy that may be appropriate.

As part of the treatment for heart failure, your doctor might suggest ways that you can live a healthier life. For instance, eating low-fat and low-sodium foods is important for people with heart failure.

Your doctor may recommend cardiac rehabilitation as part of your treatment plan. In cardiac rehabilitation, you work with a team of healthcare experts that helps you recover. To help you learn to avoid future heart-related problems, the team:

- Shows you an appropriate exercise program
- Suggests new eating habits
- Orders medications to reduce your symptoms
- Helps you regain or learn new lifestyle and coping skills
- Recommends lifestyle changes (for instance, focusing on activities that do not wear you out.