

Heart Failure

The term “heart failure” makes it sound like the heart is no longer working at all and that there is nothing that can be done. Actually, heart failure means that the heart isn’t pumping as well as it could. Your body depends on the heart’s pumping action to deliver oxygen and nutrient-rich blood to the body’s cells. When the cells are properly nourished, the body can function normally. With heart failure, the weakened heart can’t supply the cells with enough blood. But many people with heart failure lead a full, enjoyable life when the condition is managed with medications and healthy lifestyle changes.

The weakening of the heart's pumping ability causes

- Blood and fluid to back up into the lungs
- The buildup of fluid in the feet, ankles and legs – called edema
- Tiredness and shortness of breath

The leading causes of heart failure are coronary artery disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. Treatment means treating the underlying cause of your heart failure.

With heart failure, the heart can't keep up with its workload. At first the heart tries to make up for this by:

- Enlarging. When the heart chamber enlarges, it stretches more and can contract more strongly, so it pumps more blood.
- Developing more muscle mass. The increase in muscle mass occurs because the contracting cells of the heart get bigger. This lets the heart pump more strongly, at least initially.
- Pumping faster. This helps to increase the heart's output.

The body also tries to compensate in other ways:

- The blood vessels narrow to keep blood pressure up, trying to make up for the heart's loss of power.
- The body diverts blood away from less important tissues and organs to maintain flow to the most vital organs, the heart and brain.

These temporary measures mask the problem of heart failure, but they don't solve it. Heart failure continues and worsens until these substitute processes no longer work.

Eventually the heart and body just can't keep up, and the person experiences the fatigue, breathing problems or other symptoms that usually prompt a trip to the doctor.

Heart Failure (Continued)

The body's compensation mechanisms help explain why some people may not become aware of their condition until years after their heart begins its decline. (It's also a good reason to have a regular checkup with your doctor.)

Warning Signs:

- Shortness of breath
- Coughing or wheezing
- Body swelling (feet/legs)
- Tired/fatigue
- Nausea/ no appetite
- Confusion
- Increased heart rate

