

Heart failure - a guide to symptom management

Patient information leaflet

How to maintain a stable condition and what you should do if your symptoms become worse



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Introduction

The information contained in this leaflet is suitable for people who have been diagnosed with heart failure.

This leaflet contains some basic advice and provides guidance when monitoring and reporting changes in symptoms.

Heart failure is the term used to describe the symptoms and signs which occur if the heart becomes less efficient at pumping blood around the body either while you are resting or exercising. People with heart failure may experience breathlessness, swelling of the ankles (due to fluid retention) and tiredness. Symptoms are normally controlled with prescribed medication and by following lifestyle advice.



Heart failure may, however, become less well controlled at times leading to worsening symptoms. It is important, therefore, that changes are detected and reported to your doctor or heart failure nurse as early as possible so that you can be treated and stabilised quickly.

This leaflet helps to outline....

- How to maintain a stable condition
- How you might feel when your symptoms are stable
- How you might feel when your symptoms are unstable
- Who to report symptom changes to
- What to do in an emergency

My personal management plan

We hope that if you, your GP, your hospital doctor, your heart failure specialist nurse and those closest to you all work together, you will keep feeling well and be able to monitor any changes in your condition early on.

There are several clues which may suggest that your symptoms are not as well controlled as they should be. Please telephone your GP or your heart failure nurse if you notice any of the following:

1. Your weight increasing by 3-4lbs or 2kg in 2 days, or you notice a gradual and continual weight gain over several days
2. Waking from sleep feeling very short of breath, "choked"
3. Increased feelings of shortness of breath at any time
4. Your ankles or feet becoming more swollen - try to become familiar with the appearance of your feet and lower legs. If you do this you will be able to spot changes more readily
5. If you experience diarrhoea and/or vomiting for more than 24 hours.
6. More frequent and/or more severe episodes of angina (caused when the supply of oxygen-rich blood to the heart becomes restricted which can lead to pains in the chest, jaw or left arm).
7. If you have any concerns about your condition, no matter how small.

The symptom guides found over the next three pages will help you to decide how you are feeling and what action you may need to take.

How am I feeling?

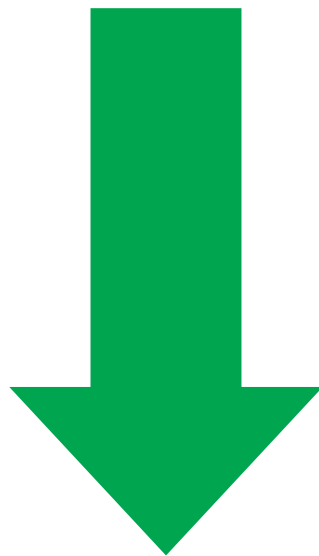
Symptom guide one

My breathing is the same as usual

I have not gained any weight

My ankles and legs appear the same as normal

I am no more tired than usual



Your symptoms are under control

Continue as normal with your usual medication

How am I feeling?

Symptom guide two

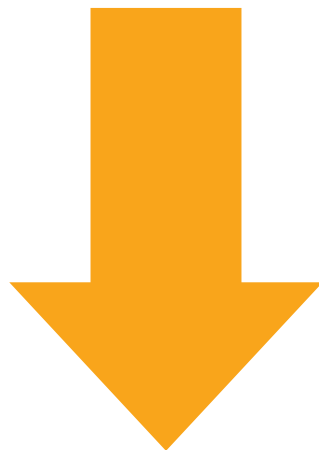
My breathing is worse than usual, especially when I am lying flat or I am waking during the night because of breathlessness

I am not able to walk as far as usual

I have gained 1.5 - 2kg (3-4lbs) in weight in 2 days

My ankles are more swollen than usual

I am feeling unusually tired



If you are experiencing one or more of these, your symptoms may be getting worse

You could be entering a danger zone where your symptoms are becoming out of control

Contact your GP or Heart Failure Specialist Nurse (HFSN) as soon as possible.

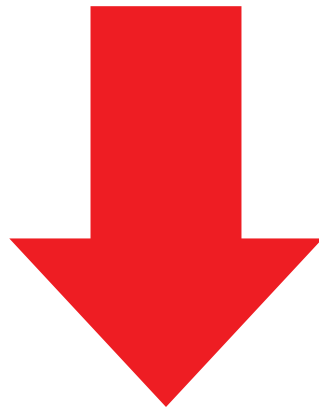
What to do in an emergency

You have become very unwell

You are very breathless at rest

**You are unable to finish a sentence
due to being breathless**

You may or may not have chest pain



**If you experience one or more of these,
your symptoms are now out of control**

This is a medical alert/emergency

Seek help immediately

DIAL 999 FOR AN AMBULANCE

Further information

A little extra care and a few simple lifestyle changes can make a big difference to how well you feel and your quality of life.



Below are tips that you should follow to help maintain a stable condition.

- 1. Take your medicine regularly and carefully, as prescribed. Seeing your heart failure nurse regularly is important as it may take some time to reach the right doses of medication for you.**
- 2. Make sure you do not run out of tablets.**
- 3. Eat a well balanced diet which is low in saturated fat and salt.**
- 4. Report any sudden weight changes (over 1.5 - 2kg or 3 - 4lb over 2 days) or a gradual continued weight gain over several days to your HFSN.**
- 5. Report any increase in breathlessness to your HFSN.**
- 6. Report any increase in the swelling of your ankles to your HFSN.**
- 7. Managing other conditions you may have will help to control your heart failure symptoms. It is important to control conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.**

Regular weight monitoring

It is important to monitor your weight closely as this will indicate if you are retaining too much fluid and your heart failure is not well controlled. Weigh yourself every morning after going to the toilet **but before getting dressed and having anything to eat and drink.**

Keep a daily record. It is important you use the same set of scales to gain an accurate reading. If your weight seems to be increasing over 2-3 days, and you are not constipated you may be retaining too much fluid. This may need treating promptly.

Remember: Report any weight changes to your HFSN

Fluid Intake

On some occasions, it may be necessary to limit fluid intake - your doctor or HFSN will advise you. This may be indicated if your symptoms have become less well controlled; you are requiring high doses of water tablets or have a low sodium level in your blood. The amount of fluid you will be limited to and for how long will depend on your individual circumstances and you will be guided by your doctor or heart failure nurse at that time. Any fluid restrictions must include all fluids such as tea, coffee, water, juice, soups, sauces, gravy and alcohol.

Immunisation

Every year you should ensure you have an influenza (flu) vaccine. You should also have the pneumonia vaccine if you have not already had it. Unlike the flu vaccine this is only given once in a person's lifetime.

Alcohol

Alcohol consumption should be limited to 1-2 units per day (1 unit is equal to half a pint of ordinary strength lager/beer/cider or 1 small glass of wine or 1 pub measure of spirits). A high alcohol intake has been linked to heart failure, high blood pressure and abnormal heart rates. It can also increase fluid retention in the body and will add to your total daily fluid allowance.

Medication

Do not stop your medication without first consulting your GP or your heart failure nurse as this may be dangerous. If you are experiencing side effects your medication can be reviewed and adjusted safely, under supervision of a health professional.

If you have any questions about how the information in this leaflet applies to you please discuss with your doctor/nurse. For further information about heart failure ask for a copy of the British Heart Foundation booklet, 'Living with Heart Failure'.

Medicine reminder chart

Medicine/ Dose	Number of Tablets				Comments
	breakfast 8 - 10am	midday/ lunch 2pm	dinner/ tea 6pm	supper/ bedtime 10pm	

Weight chart

date	weight

date	weight

Vital signs

bp - blood pressure

Your doctor/nurse can fill this in, or you can using your own personal machine.

date	bp	pulse

date	bp	pulse



This leaflet has been developed by Jonathan Dexter, British Heart Foundation Heart Failure Specialist Nurse, Community Health Services, Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust.



**If you
need help to
understand this
leaflet or would like it
in a different language
or format such as large
print, Braille or audio,
please ask a
member of
staff.**

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