

HEART FAILURE – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Photo: © Andreas P / Fotolia

DEAR PATIENT,

Heart failure normally develops as the consequence of other conditions, for instance high blood pressure or after a heart attack.

This information is intended for men and women who have heart failure, their family members and close friends. The more you know about your condition, the easier it will be for you to manage it.

At a glance: heart failure

- One in five people over the age of 75 has heart failure.
- Heart failure is caused by the heart no longer being able to pump correctly. The body is then not supplied with enough oxygen.
- Some of the typical symptoms of heart failure are: breathlessness, tiredness, exhaustion, reduced ability to cope and fluid retention.
- A healthy lifestyle and medication are an integral part of treatment. Some patients may also be fitted with a pacemaker.

▶ WHAT IS HEART FAILURE?

The heart is a muscle that is roughly the size of a fist and is hollow inside. The muscle walls are particularly thick to enable it to function as a pump. Each time the heart beats, blood is pumped from the heart around the body.

The term used by experts for heart failure is *cardiac insufficiency*. This term is used when the heart does not pump enough blood around the body. The body then has less oxygen and symptoms develop.

▶ SYMPTOMS

Some of the typical symptoms of heart failure are:

- general tiredness and exhaustion
- reduced ability to cope
- breathlessness
- fluid retention in the body, for instance in the ankles or legs

When the body retains fluid, your socks may dig into you or your trouser waistband may feel tighter. Fluid can be retained elsewhere in the body, too, for instance in the genital area. Patients may experience breathlessness even when carrying out light tasks. In many cases this is not life-threatening and can often be effectively treated. Furthermore, patients may experience a dry cough, the need to urinate at night or dizziness. Some patients only develop one of these symptoms, others several.

You normally undergo several investigations to diagnose heart failure, for instance a blood test, an electrocardiogram (ECG) and a heart ultrasound.

▶ TREATMENT

You can contribute to successful treatment through your own behaviour, particularly physical exercise. Treatment varies in line with the severity of heart failure. Experts recommend several medicines to most patients. It is important for you to immediately inform your doctor of any side effects.

In addition to medication, a certain type of pacemaker may also be beneficial for some patients. It helps two chambers in the heart to beat in time again. In addition, a small, electronic device can be implanted. It monitors heart rhythm and automatically delivers an electric shock in an emergency. But it does not ease the symptoms of heart failure.

▶ Heart failure

▶ WHAT YOU SHOULD KEEP AN EYE ON

The symptoms of heart failure can change. You may experience stable and unstable spells during your illness. If you notice any of the following symptoms for the first time or if they get worse, you should contact your doctor:

- weight gain of more than 2.5 kilos in the space of a week
- swelling of the ankles or lower legs
- sudden rapid heartbeat
- your heart doesn't just skip a beat but also beats irregularly for a few minutes
- pain or a feeling of tightness in the chest
- persistent cough
- you become breathless more quickly than usual
- you have to sit upright on a chair in order to breathe more easily
- you need several pillows at night

▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Sport and physical exercise have a positive impact on the health of many people with this condition. The symptoms become less severe. Experts recommend the regular practice of a sport if this is possible for you. You could also join a cardiac sports group. In order to be sure that there are no health constraints, check with your treatment team first.

- If you have heart failure, it really is worth giving up smoking. The first important step: talk to your doctor and agree a concrete goal. For instance your target date to stop smoking. There are many effective ways of supporting you.
- Experts recommend a balanced diet. There are no special diets for people with heart failure. Not eating any salt does not offer any benefits.
- Talk to your treatment team about the right amount of fluid you should drink every day.
- A weight diary is helpful in detecting fluid retention early on. This is where you keep a daily record of your weight. If it increases, it could indicate a worsening cardiac function.
- Some medicines which you take for other reasons can make heart failure worse, for instance certain painkillers or anti-hypertensive drugs. Some non-prescription drugs may also have this effect. Talk to your doctor about any medicines you are taking or would like to take. A medication plan would be helpful here: www.kbv.de/html/medikationsplan.php. The best thing is to take this plan with you every time you go to see your doctor or to the pharmacy.
- As serious heart failure problems frequently occur as a consequence of respiratory infections, experts recommend an annual flu vaccination. Ask your doctor about the pros and cons.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and other useful links

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings in the National Treatment Guideline "Chronic Heart Failure". The Programme for National Treatment Guidelines is funded by the German Medical Association (BÄK), the Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians (KBV) and the Working Group of Scientific Medical Societies (AWMF).

Methodology and sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/quellen-und-methodik/herzschwaeche

Further patient information leaflets on heart failure: www.patinfo.org

Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 3101 8960.

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