



## **Frequently Asked Questions: Heart Failure**

### **What is heart failure?**

Heart failure is an umbrella term that covers a number of conditions and can sound a bit scary. What it actually means is the heart muscle has become weakened and is unable to pump blood around the body as efficiently as before. The result is the heart is unable to supply enough blood to the body quickly enough, leading to a variety of symptoms.

### **What are the main signs and symptoms?**

Some of the most common signs and symptoms of heart failure are:

- shortness of breath during activity, at night, or at rest;
- swelling of the ankles, feet or around the waist due to fluid retention;
- putting on weight due to fluid retention;
- tiredness or feeling exhausted;

### **How is heart failure diagnosed?**

Some people may live with the signs and symptoms of heart failure for months or even years before they are diagnosed. This is because the symptoms experienced can have a variety of causes. Some people even put their symptoms down to old age and may put off going to the doctor. As heart failure has various causes, most people undergo several tests before they receive their diagnosis, these include: blood tests; Electrocardiogram (ECG); chest x-rays and echocardiogram.

### **What causes heart failure?**

The commonest causes include:

- a previous heart attack;
- problems with the valves of the heart;
- disease of the heart muscle;
- high blood pressure;
- long term chest problems.

## Can it be cured?

This depends on the cause. Unfortunately for many people there is no cure, however there are many things that you can be done to help reduce the symptoms of heart failure and control the underlying condition, these include: taking your medication as prescribed; weighing yourself every day; staying active; taking care with the amount of fluid you consume and salt you eat, and promptly reporting any changes in your health. These simple actions can both help you to live longer and ensure you have a good quality of life.

## How is heart failure managed?

The main way of managing the underlying cause and controlling the symptoms is by taking medications. Some of the most common ones are:

- Diuretics also know as water tablets, these help rid the body of excess fluid;
- Angiotensin Converting Enzyme (ACE) inhibitors, making it easier for heart to pump;
- Betablockers, these help slow the heart rate and reduce its workload.

There are other methods of supporting the heart, including special devices to monitor and control the heart's beat and surgery to renew a damaged or leaking valve. Everyone diagnosed with heart failure will be investigated to find the underlying cause. Treatments are then individually tailored to provide the best possible care.

## What impact will this have on my life?

Heart failure may not only cause physical symptoms but can also cause feelings and emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness or depression. By recognising that these emotions are a normal part of adjusting to your condition, you can take positive steps that can help you feel better. These feelings may not only affect you, but are often experienced by close friends and family too, so encourage them to speak to their doctor should they need some support.

## What help can I get?

Heart failure can be a complex condition. Managing it effectively requires partnerships to be built between you, your health and social care providers, and your family and friends. Other agencies and organisations can provide support too, such as financial advisors and charities like Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland and the British Heart Foundation. 'One size never fits all', so speak to your heart failure nurse, cardiologist or local doctor, they are there to help.

**Heart Help & Advice Lines** – staffed by health professionals

**British Heart Foundation** - 0300 330 3311 (similar cost to 01 and 02 numbers)

**Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland** - 0808 801 0899 (freephone number)