Congestive heart failure (CHF)
Summary

- Heart failure refers to the heart’s inability to pump enough blood to satisfy the needs of the body.
- Major causes of heart failure are coronary heart disease and high blood pressure.
- Treatment includes medications, lifestyle changes and surgery.

Heart failure, sometimes called congestive cardiac failure (CCF), is a condition in which the heart muscle is weakened and can’t pump as well as it usually does. The main pumping chambers of the heart (the ventricles) can change size and thickness, and either can’t contract (squeeze) or can’t relax (fill) as well as they should. This triggers fluid retention, particularly in the lungs, legs and abdomen.

The major causes of heart failure include coronary heart disease, hypertension, idiopathic cardiomyopathy and other heart diseases. Of these, coronary heart disease (usually accompanied by a history of past heart attacks) is by far the most common.

The major factors that contribute to coronary heart disease include:

- obesity
- unhealthy eating
- high blood pressure
- diabetes
- smoking
- physical inactivity.

Heart failure is more common in elderly people. The survival rate for people with this disorder depends on the severity of their condition. Treatments include medication, lifestyle changes and (sometimes) surgery.

Symptoms of heart failure

Symptoms of heart failure include:

- new or worsening shortness of breath (particularly during physical activity or waking you up at night)
- weight gain
- muscular fatigue, tiredness
- swelling of ankles or legs
- swelling of abdomen
- dizziness
- heart palpitations
- chest pain or discomfort in parts of the upper body
- unexplained coughing and wheezing
- loss of appetite
- constipation.

Causes of heart failure

The heart is a double pump made up of four chambers. Deoxygenated blood from the veins enters the right upper chamber (right atrium), is passed to the right lower chamber (right ventricle), and then pumped to the lungs.

Oxygenated blood from the lungs enters the left upper chamber (left atrium) and then enters the left lower chamber (left ventricle). The blood is then pumped around the body, under pressure, via arteries.

In a person with heart failure, one or both of the ventricles do not empty properly. This leads to increased pressure in the atria (upper chambers) and the nearby veins. This backlog of blood can affect the kidney and lungs–interfering with their function and leading to fluid retention (oedema) in the lungs, abdominal organs and legs.

In some people with heart failure, rather than failed pumping of the blood from the ventricle, there is failed relaxation of the ventricle. This also leads to blood pooling under back-pressure.

Heart failure can be caused by several conditions, including:

- past heart attacks from coronary heart disease – this can lead to scarring in the heart muscle and is the most common cause for heart failure
- high blood pressure (hypertension) – the high pressure in the arteries means that the heart must keep pumping more forcefully. It may not be able to keep it up
- heart valve disease – damaged heart valves may allow the blood to flow backwards or may obstruct forward flow
• congenital heart disease – heart abnormalities may be present from birth, such as defective valves or abnormal communications between heart chambers
• Idiopathic cardiomyopathy – this condition is characterised by enlargement of the heart muscle, where the left ventricle enlarges to compensate for poor contraction
• myocarditis – viruses or other infections may damage the heart muscle
• heart arrhythmia – rapid heartbeat with irregularity, over a long period of time, can also lead to inefficient contraction and heart failure
• thyroid disease – the thyroid gland produces too much of its hormone, thyroxine. This increases the work of the heart and can lead to heart failure.

Factors that can worsen symptoms of heart failure

The symptoms of heart failure can be worsened by a number of factors, including:

• anaemia
• too much salt, fluid, or alcohol in the diet
• pregnancy
• some infections
• kidney diseases
• lung diseases.
• arrhythmias (irregular heart rhythm).

Diagnosis of heart failure

Heart failure can be confirmed with a variety of tests, including:

• x-rays
• echocardiography
• exercise stress test
• resting (ECG)
• lung function tests
• angiography
• blood tests.

Treatment for heart failure

Treatment for heart failure may include:

• medicines, such as
  • diuretics – to remove excess fluid
  • ACE inhibitors – to open up blood vessels, reduce blood pressure and reduce sodium retention and water retention
  • certain beta-blockers – to slow the heart rate and reduce its work (ACE inhibitors and beta blockers can increase survival and reduce the likelihood of hospitalisation)
  • addressing the underlying disorder – for example, treatment of high blood pressure
  • lifestyle changes – such as regular gentle physical activity, losing excess body fat, stopping smoking, adhering to healthy eating patterns with low salt, restricting alcohol and having adequate rest
  • insertion of implantable cardiac devices
  • surgery – to replace narrowed or leaking heart valves
  • coronary bypass surgery – in some cases
  • heart transplant – in extreme cases.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• Heart Foundation Helpline. Tel. 13 11 12

References

• Guidelines for the prevention, detection and management of chronic heart failure in Australia (Updated October 2011), Heart Foundation, Australia.

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Heart

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab.

- Heart basics
- Know your risks for heart disease
- Heart attack warning signs and symptoms
- Keep your heart healthy
- Heart conditions
- Tests and treatments
- Recovery after a heart attack
Heart basics

- Heart explained
  The heart is about the size of a clenched fist and lies in the middle of your chest, behind and slightly to the left of your breastbone.

- Circulatory system
  The heart, blood and blood vessels work together to service the cells of the body.

- Blood pressure
  Healthy eating and lifestyle changes can help to manage high blood pressure.

- Chest pain
  If in doubt about the cause of your chest pain, call an ambulance.

- Heart attack
  Heart attack is an emergency. If you have warning signs of heart attack, get help fast. Call triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance.

- Heart attack - it's Ok to Call Triple Zero (000) (video)
  Heart attack warning signs aren't what you think. Symptoms vary and they may not always be severe. Learn the warning signs because the sooner you recognise your heart attack and get treatment, the...

- Heart disease and stroke
  Although blocked blood vessels can cause both coronary heart disease and some types of stroke, stroke is not the same as heart disease.

- Heart health - managing heart disease for life (video)
  Over 700,000 Australians are living with coronary heart disease. Learn about what you should know about managing heart disease.

Know your risks for heart disease

- Heart health check - learn the risk factors (video)
  Heart disease affects both women and men. Cardiologist Cathie Coleman from St Vincent's Hospital explains the risk factors for heart disease and what actions you can take to lower your risks.

- Heart disease - know your risk
  Risk factors for heart disease include smoking, diabetes, obesity, family history and age.

- Heart disease and stroke - your risk score
  Absolute risk is a measure your doctor can calculate to understand the likelihood of you experiencing a heart attack or stroke in the next five years.

- Diabetes - long-term effects
  The risk of most diabetes-related complications can be reduced.

- Smoking and heart disease
  A smoker's excess risk of heart attack reduces rapidly after only one year of not smoking.

- Heart disease and mental health
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

- Cholesterol
  Your body needs cholesterol, but it can make its own. You don't need cholesterol in your diet.

- Blood pressure - keep your blood pressure down (video)
  Heart Foundation of Australia warns of the risk of high blood pressure and tells you what you can do to keep your blood pressure down.

- Heart disease - know and manage your risk factors (video)
  Over 700,000 Australians are currently living with coronary heart disease. There are actions you can take to help prevent heart disease and to manage your life after a heart attack.

- Health check
  This health assessment questionnaire will identify which zones of your lifestyle are contributing to your personal health risk and provide actions you can take to make positive change.
• Obesity
  Overweight and obesity are essentially preventable diseases...

• Blood pressure (high) - hypertension
  Hypertension, or high blood pressure, can increase your risk of heart attack, kidney failure and stroke...

Heart attack warning signs and symptoms

• Heart attack - know the warning signs (video)
  Learn about the warning signs and symptoms you may experience if you are having a heart attack or angina attack...

• Heart attack warning signs - personal story - Katie (video)
  Learn about the warning signs and symptoms you may experience if you are having a heart attack or angina attack...

• Heart attack warning signs - personal story - Kate
  Find out more from cardiologist Professor Ian Meredith...

• Heart attack every minute counts. The warning signs of a heart attack can be varied and may not always be sudden or severe. Find out more from cardiologist Professor Ian Meredith...

• Heart disease - Jo, 5 stents in her 40s and a triple bypass at age 57 (video)
  Jo tells of her experience with heart disease including having 5 stents in her 40s and a triple bypass at age 57...

• Heart disease - Marina, Pulmonary Emboli at age 23 (video)
  Heart disease - Marina, Pulmonary Emboli at age 23...

• Heart attack warning signs - personal story - Danny (video)
  Heart attack warning signs aren't what you think. Symptoms vary and they may not always be severe. Learn the warning signs because the sooner you recognise your heart attack and get treatment, the...

• Heart attack warning signs - personal story - Danny's story about his heart attack...

• Heart attack - it's Ok to Call Tripwe Zero (000) (video)
  Heart attack warning signs aren't what you think. Symptoms vary and they may not always be severe. Learn the warning signs because the sooner you recognise your heart attack and get treatment, the...

• Heart disease - Margaret, Heart Attack at age 35 (video)
  Heart disease - Margaret, Heart Attack at age 35...

• Chest pain
  If in doubt about the cause of your chest pain, call an ambulance...

Keep your heart healthy

• Heart disease - know your risk
  Risk factors for heart disease include smoking, diabetes, obesity, family history and age...

• 10 tips for a healthier heart
  Have fun with friends ... 10 tips for a healthier heart...

• Heart disease and stroke - your risk score
  Absolute risk is a measure your doctor can calculate to understand the likelihood of you experiencing a heart attack or stroke in the next five years...

• Cholesterol -healthy eating tips
  Replacing foods that contain saturated fats with foods that contain polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats will help to lower your cholesterol...

• Heart disease and food
  A diet low in saturated fats and high in fibre and plant foods can substantially reduce your risk of developing heart disease...

• Heart disease and mental health
  Did you know that your mental health can affect your heart health and your heart health can affect your mental health? Depression can also affect how well people with heart disease recover, and...

• Heart disease - eating for a healthy heart (video)
  Learn the three steps you can take to improve your heart health today...

• Heart health - managing heart disease for life (video)
Over 700,000 Australians are living with coronary heart disease. Learn about what you should know about managing heart disease.

- **How to cut down on salt**
  
  Even if you are careful about the salt you consume, you may be surprised that some of the food you eat contains hidden salt that you’re not even aware of. Learn how to cut down on salt.

- **Reduce your risk of early death**
  
  You can dramatically reduce your risk of early death by making a few simple lifestyle changes.

- **Walking for good health**
  
  Walking will improve your fitness and reduce your risk of heart disease.

### Heart conditions

- **Heart condition - know your diagnosis (video)**
  
  This video explains some common heart procedures and provides questions to ask your doctor to ensure you understand what has happened to your heart.

- **Aortic stenosis**
  
  Aortic stenosis may be congenital (present from before birth), but is often diagnosed during teenage years.

- **Chest pain**
  
  If in doubt about the cause of your chest pain, call an ambulance.

- **Heart abnormality birth defects**
  
  Some congenital heart defects are mild and cause no significant disturbance to the way the heart functions.

- **Heart arrhythmias and palpitations**
  
  A heart that beats irregularly, too fast or too slow, is experiencing an arrhythmia.

- **Heart attack**
  
  Heart attack is an emergency. If you have warning signs of heart attack, get help fast. Call triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance.

- **Heart attack warning signs - personal story - Katie (video)**
  
  Heart attack warning signs - personal story - Kate.

- **Heart conditions - angina**
  
  Angina attacks can be prompted by exertion or physical exercise, when the hard-working heart muscle requires greater amounts of oxygen.

- **Heart conditions - atrial fibrillation**
  
  Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a type of arrhythmia, which means that the heart beats fast and abnormally.

- **Heart conditions - endocarditis**
  
  Endocarditis is an infection of the heart valves or the inner lining of the heart.

- **Heart disease and stroke**
  
  Although blocked blood vessels can cause both coronary heart disease and some types of stroke, stroke is not the same as heart disease.

- **Heart disease - enlarged heart**
  
  An enlarged heart isn't a condition in itself, but a symptom of an underlying problem that is causing the heart to work harder than normal.

- **Heart disease - Jo, 5 stents in her 40s and a triple bypass at age 57 (video)**
  
  Jo tells of her experience with heart disease including having 5 stents in her 40s and a triple bypass at age 57.

- **Heart disease - Margaret, Heart Attack at age 35 (video)**
  
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- **Heart disease - Marina, Pulmonary Emboli at age 23 (video)**
  
  Heart disease - Marina, Pulmonary Emboli at age 23.

- **Heart disorders (acquired) - children**
  
  Some children acquire a heart problem after an illness in childhood, and this is called an acquired heart defect.

- **Heart health check - learn the risk factors (video)**
Heart disease affects both women and men. Cardiologist Cathie Coleman from St Vincent's Hospital explains the risk factors for heart disease and what actions you can take to lower your risks.

- **Heart murmur**
  Many children have innocent heart murmurs that don't require any treatment, but medical tests are often needed to check.

- **Long QT syndrome**
  You should be investigated for long QT syndrome if you faint for no apparent reason, during or after exercise or emotional excitement.

- **Metabolic syndrome**
  Metabolic syndrome is a collection of conditions that can increase your risk of diabetes, stroke and heart disease.

- **Noonan syndrome**
  Noonan syndrome is a genetic condition that usually includes heart abnormalities and characteristic facial features.

- **Pericarditis**
  Pericarditis symptoms may be similar to those of heart attack and include chest pain and abnormal heart rhythms.

- **Rheumatic heart disease**
  Stopping episodes of recurrent ARF can prevent rheumatic heart disease (RHD).

- **Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome**
  Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome is characterised by attacks of rapid heart rate or tachycardia.

**Tests and treatments**

- **Blood pressure (high) - hypertension**
  Hypertension, or high blood pressure, can increase your risk of heart attack, kidney failure and stroke.

- **Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)**
  CPR is a life-saving skill that everyone should learn from an accredited organisation.

- **Coronary angiogram**
  A coronary angiogram is the most accurate diagnostic test for a range of heart problems, including coronary heart disease.

- **ECG test**
  A doctor may recommend an electrocardiogram for patients who may be at risk of heart disease because of family history, smoking, overweight, diabetes or other conditions.

- **Heart bypass surgery**
  After heart bypass surgery, eat a wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals and cold-water fish.

- **Heart disease - angioplasty and stent procedures (video)**
  People with coronary heart disease talk about the medical procedures that followed their heart attack and diagnosis.

- **Implantable cardiac devices**
  A person with an artificial cardiac pacemaker can live a normal life and can still perform moderate to strenuous activities.

- **Organ and tissue transplantation**
  Transplantation varies depending on the transplant organ or tissue so speak with your medical team about surgical procedures, recovery and medications.

**Recovery after a heart attack**

- **Recovering from a heart attack**
  Make sure you follow your plan when you leave hospital, take your medication and keep your appointments with doctors.

- **Living with a heart condition**
  Attending cardiac rehabilitation will help you to create a good foundation for living with your heart condition.

- **Heart condition - know your diagnosis (video)**
  This video explains some common heart procedures and provides questions to ask your doctor to ensure you understand what has happened to your heart.

- **Heart disease - know and manage your risk factors (video)**

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