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# Living with Congestive Heart Failure



Patient information developed by EPICORE Centre,  
Division of Cardiology, University of Alberta

## You are not alone

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Your doctor has told you that you have congestive heart failure (CHF). According to the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation, you are not alone. There are about 330,000 Canadians diagnosed with CHF and about 500,000 who have the disease but don't know it.

Your healthcare team understands that you need to be well informed because you are the most important person in managing your condition. They will advise and support you. Together, you will work out a treatment plan that will help you lead a more enjoyable life.

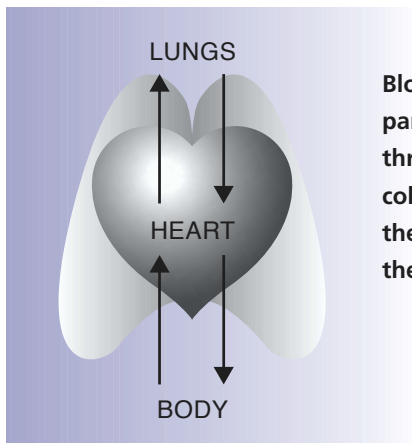
Experience tells us that patients who understand their condition and participate in its treatment, live a longer and better life. In fact, there are many things you can do yourself to feel better and to prevent your condition from getting worse.

You will probably have many questions about this condition and how it is treated. That is why this manual has been developed. Read and use every section of it and you and your family will learn to manage your CHF.

## How does the heart work?

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The heart is a hollow muscle, about the size of an adult's fist. The main job of the heart is to pump blood and oxygen through the body.



**Blood comes into the heart from every part of the body. The heart pumps it through the lungs where the blood collects oxygen. Then, the heart pumps the blood with oxygen back through the body.**

Just like a car needs gasoline, the body needs blood that carries oxygen to work properly.

## What is congestive heart failure?

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Congestive heart failure, or CHF, does not mean that your heart has "failed". It means your heart just does not pump as strongly as it should. This is because the heart muscle is weak.

When this happens, the body does not get enough blood that carries oxygen. That can make you feel tired. Also, when the heart does not pump strongly enough, blood moves slowly through every part of the body. It becomes backed-up. This causes swelling and it can make breathing difficult.

Congestive heart failure usually develops slowly. That's why it is important to start managing it as soon as it is diagnosed.

## What are the symptoms of CHF?

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You may have one or more of these symptoms:

- tiredness
- weakness
- sudden weight gain due to fluid build-up
- trouble breathing, especially when physically active or when lying down
- cough
- swelling in legs and feet
- loss of appetite
- bloating of the abdomen (stomach)

## Why do I have CHF?

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CHF can be caused by many things:

- high blood pressure
- heart attack
- a heart valve that does not work properly
- heart infection
- drinking too much alcohol over time

## How is CHF treated?

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Congestive heart failure cannot be cured, but it can be managed so that you feel better. The goal of treatment is to make it easier for your heart to pump blood.

Treatment includes:

- the right diet
- exercise prescribed by your doctor
- rest
- medication



Your healthcare team will help you work out a treatment plan that is right for you. You may need to change some things in your life. Sometimes this can be difficult, but over time it will become as routine as brushing your teeth.

## How can I manage my CHF?

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There are many things you can do to improve the way your heart works:

1. Follow healthy lifestyle habits:

- limit salt in your diet
- limit fluids
- weigh yourself daily and keep track of changes
- do exercise as prescribed by your doctor
- have daily rest periods
- stay away from alcohol and smoking

2. Take your medication regularly

3. Know when to call your doctor



## Follow A Low Salt Diet

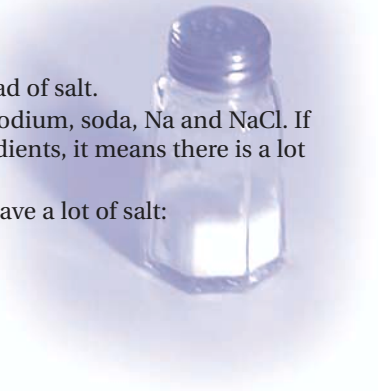
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### Why do I need to limit the amount of salt I eat?

Salt is like a sponge. It keeps extra fluid in your body. Extra fluid may cause swelling. It also makes your heart work harder.

### How can I cut down on the salt I eat?

- Do not use salt when cooking.
- Remove the salt shaker from the table.
- To season food, use herbs and spices instead of salt.
- Read food labels. Look for the words salt, sodium, soda, Na and NaCl. If these words are listed in the first five ingredients, it means there is a lot of salt in the product.
- Stay away from these foods because they have a lot of salt:
  - × lunch meats
  - × cheese
  - × canned foods like soups and tomatoes
  - × bacon
  - × salted nuts, crackers, and party snacks
  - × barbecue sauce, packaged salad dressings, ketchup, and soya sauce
  - × convenience foods like frozen dinners
  - × pickles
- Ask your doctor if you can use salt substitutes. These are not good for everyone.
- Some medications contain a lot of salt. Examples would be some antacids and laxatives. Check with your pharmacist about this before you buy any non-prescription medication.



### What else should I know about my diet?

- Make sure you eat a balanced diet. It should include all four food groups:
  1. Meats
  2. Milk products
  3. Grains (bread, pasta, etc.)
  4. Fruits/vegetables
- If you are taking a diuretic (water pill), you may need more of the mineral called potassium in your diet. Ask your doctor about this.
- Some foods can change how certain medications work. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if any foods react with your prescription or non-prescription medications.
- Ask your doctor if you should be on a "low fat" diet.

## Limit Fluids

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### Why do I need to limit how much I drink?

When you have congestive heart failure, you may keep extra fluid in your body. This makes it harder for your heart to work. If you limit how much fluid you drink in a day, it will be easier for your heart to pump blood. This will make you feel better.

Drink no more than 6 to 8 cups of fluid in one day. This includes the water you drink to take your medication. Soup, jello, ice cream, pudding, coffee, tea, milk and pop should all be counted as fluid.

If your mouth is dry you can:

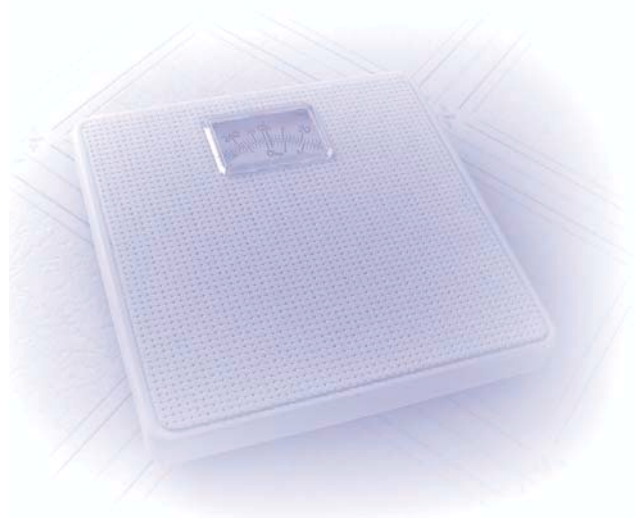
- Chew gum
- Take small sips of water
- Suck on ice chips or hard candies

### Why do I have to weigh myself?

Sudden weight gain can be an early sign of fluid build-up. Be sure to weigh yourself every morning and record your weight in the Weight Chart provided in section 3 of this manual:

- empty your bladder first
- weigh yourself before breakfast
- wear the same amount of clothing every time you weigh yourself

Call your doctor if you gain more than 2 lbs (1kg) in two days, or 5 lbs (3 kg) in one week.



## Exercise

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### Why do I need to exercise?

Many people with congestive heart failure feel too tired to exercise. However, research shows that staying active makes you feel less tired and short of breath.

**Walking is one of the best exercises you can do.** At first, you may only want to walk for a short time. Slowly increase how long you walk. Try to walk three times a week. Exercise does not have to be hard to be good for you.

### How do I start exercising?

- First, talk to your doctor about how much activity is good for you
- Pick an exercise you like
- Find a friend to exercise with
- Make it part of your regular routine



### Are there times I should not exercise?

Do not exercise after eating a meal. Instead, have a rest and wait about one hour. If you become tired or feel unwell while exercising, do not try to finish your exercise.

### Stop exercising right away if you:

- become short of breath
- have chest pain or discomfort
- feel any discomfort at all
- feel weak or dizzy
- have a fast heart rate

## Take Rests

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### Why do I need rest periods during the day?

Rest periods are a time for your heart to "recharge" and collect new energy. Rest is especially important after a meal or physical activity. You can read, listen to music, or watch TV.

It is important to include both rest and activity in your day. That is why you should:

- Alternate heavy and light tasks during the day.
- Make a schedule of things you will do in a day. Do what is most important first.
- Be sure to include rest periods in your schedule.
- Get family and friends to help with tasks.

## Avoid Bad Habits

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### Alcohol and Smoking

Your doctor may tell you to limit alcohol use and to stop smoking.

Alcohol can make your heart condition worse. It can also change how some medications work. Ask your doctor what your limits should be.

Smoking reduces the amount of oxygen in your body. This makes your heart pump harder.

Talk to your doctor if you need help limiting alcohol use or quitting smoking. It is never too late to stop these habits. There are programs available that can help.

## Take Your Medication

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### Which medications are used to treat congestive heart failure?

There are many medications available to control CHF that help in different ways. Because CHF cannot be cured, these medications are made to control symptoms. They make it easier for the heart to work and they make you feel better. Some medications may prevent your condition from getting worse.

Your doctor may first prescribe only one medication. Others may be added later. It is common to have changes in your medications. Every patient reacts differently and the doctor will try to find the medication which is best for you. Your doctor may also change the amount you take (dose). This is normal and does not always mean that your condition is getting worse.

It may take time for your medication to make you feel better. Do not stop taking it because you think it is not working. Do not stop taking your medication even if you feel well.

Before you buy any non-prescription medication or even natural health product, check with your doctor or pharmacist for possible reactions with the medication prescribed for your CHF.

You will learn more about the medication your doctor has prescribed in section 2 of this manual.



## When should I call my doctor?

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Paying attention to change is a very important part of managing your condition. Call your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- weight gain of more than 2 lbs (1 kg) in two days or 5 lbs (3 kg) in one week
- increased shortness of breath
- increased swelling
- ongoing cough
- increased need for extra pillows when sleeping
- nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea
- sudden weakness or dizziness, even if it is temporary

Do not wait until you are really sick to call your doctor.

## A quick list of important things to remember:

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1. Take your medication as directed
2. Follow a low salt diet
3. Limit fluids
4. Weigh yourself daily
5. Exercise
6. Have daily rest periods
7. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen



## General Information About Your Medication

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### How To Use Your Medication

- Take your medication exactly as your doctor and pharmacist tell you. Too much could be harmful, too little may have no effect.
- Take your medication at the same times each day.
- Take your medication even if you are feeling well.
- Never stop taking your medication or change the dose without talking to your doctor.

### Side Effects

- Any medication may cause unwanted changes. These are called side effects.
- Many side effects disappear when your body adjusts to the medication.
- Call your doctor if you continue to have side effects or if they become more severe. Do not stop taking the medication without talking to your doctor first.

### What To Do If You Miss A Dose

- Take the medication as soon as you remember. If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose.
- Try to get back on schedule. Take your next dose at the normal time.
- **Never double your dose** to catch up.

### Storing Your Medication

- Keep your medicine in the original container or in a pill organizer (DoseIt®).
- Keep away from heat or direct light.
- Do not store in the bathroom, near the kitchen sink, or in the fridge. Moisture can cause medication to spoil.
- Keep out of reach of children.
- Do not keep outdated medication. Do not keep any medication you are no longer taking. Your pharmacist will dispose of it properly.

### Non-Prescription Medication

- There are many medications you can buy without a doctor's prescription. Some of these medications may not be suitable for you.
- Some non-prescription medication may make your condition worse. It can also change the way your prescription medication works.
- Always ask your pharmacist for help before buying any medication.

### Herbal Products

- Herbal or "natural health products" have become very popular. Little is known about how they affect heart failure.
- Herbal products may change the way your prescribed medication works.
- If you want to use a herbal product, talk to your doctor and pharmacist first.
- Never replace your prescribed medication with a herbal product.

### Other Important Information

- Fill all your prescriptions at the same pharmacy. The pharmacy keeps a record of all medications for each patient. If you use two different pharmacies, neither one will have your complete record.
- Never run out of medication. Call for a refill a few days before you take your last pill.
- Carry a Wallet Card that lists all the medications you are taking.
- Show the Wallet Card to any doctor and dentist you visit. It is important that they know which medications you are taking.
- When you travel, make sure you have enough medication for the duration of your trip. Carry your medication in your hand luggage. Do not put it in your checked luggage. It may get lost.

***Remember, taking your medication does not have to be complicated when you follow these simple reminders.***