Heart Failure

What You Need to Know

Research shows that talking to other women with heart failure is a helpful way to share experiences, find emotional support and get practical tips for managing your health. Join our community today to share your story and help other women like you.

Taking an active role in your heart health is one of the best things you can do.

More Information

Find out more about managing heart failure and read stories of other women in our magazine, “Her Heart Matters: What Women Need to Know about Heart Failure.”

Available for free online at www.womenheart.org/heartfailure

Join the WomenHeart community to receive monthly newsletters, invitations to educational webinars, join local in-person support groups or become a member of the free online virtual heart failure-specific support group for patients and caregivers at www.womenheart.org

WomenHeart is Here for You

With the right treatments and lifestyle changes, you can live with heart failure for many years.

What is Heart Failure?

Heart failure means that your heart cannot pump well enough to meet your body’s needs. It does not mean your heart has stopped working.

Are you at risk?

Women can develop heart failure, at any age. It often stems from conditions that damage the heart. It is most common in women who:

- are age 65 or older
- have had a heart attack
- have high blood pressure, heart valve problems, congenital heart disease or diabetes
- Sleep apnea, heart rhythm problems and heavy alcohol use can also weaken the heart muscle, and may lead to heart failure.
Heart Failure Fast Facts

5.7 million Americans live with heart failure – half are women

Signs & Symptoms

Although each woman’s experience is a little different, common signs and symptoms include:
- shortness of breath
- extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- coughing or wheezing while lying down
- swelling in the legs or belly

Always listen to your body. Tell your doctor or call 9-1-1 if you experience:
- chest pain
- fainting
- worsening shortness of breath
- rapid weight gain or swelling
- new or worsening cough

The good news is that there are things you can do to improve your health.

Heart Failure, Your Body and Treatment Options

Your heart is a pump that helps send a steady supply of oxygen-rich blood and nutrients to the rest of your body.

In women with heart failure, the heart is too weak to keep up with its workload. In some cases, the heart can’t fill with enough blood (diastolic). In others, the heart can’t squeeze with enough force (systolic). Many women have both problems.

Your treatment may include:
- Lifestyle changes such as adopting a low-sodium diet, exercising regularly, losing weight, quitting smoking, avoiding alcohol and making other changes to improve your heart health
- Cardiac rehabilitation, a program to provide support for lifestyle changes and help you cope with depression or anxiety
- Medications that can help rid the body of excess fluid, strengthen the heart and/or prevent the condition from getting worse
- Surgery or medical devices that improve heart function or help to maintain a normal heart rhythm
- Mechanical support devices and cardiac transplantation for late stage disease
- Close monitoring, including frequent follow-up doctor visits and tests

Steps to Managing Heart Failure

1. Make a plan, and stick to it. Play an active role in your care and stay on track with your treatment plan.
2. Find a doctor you trust. If needed, ask whether you should see a cardiologist who is specially trained to treat advanced heart failure.
3. Take your medications correctly. Make sure you understand why you are taking each medication and how and when to take each one. Tell your doctor if you take multiple medications or are worried about cost or side effects.
4. Tune in to your body. Stay active, but don’t overdo it. Pay close attention to changes such as new symptoms or rapid weight gain.
5. Touch base with your emotions. Depression is common in women with heart failure. Don’t let your disease define you. Find the support you need to live a fulfilling and enjoyable life.
6. Know your limits. You might not be able to do everything you used to do. Pace yourself and save your energy for what matters most.
7. Don’t go it alone. Be honest with your loved ones, and don’t be shy about asking for help. Educate yourself, ask questions and build a strong relationship with your doctor.

Caregivers do a lot to help keep loved ones as healthy as possible. Lean on a trusted loved one.

Caregivers can help:
- listen, buoy spirits and wipe tears
- become a resident expert on heart failure
- pay attention to and track symptoms
- make sure medications are taken correctly—and at the right time
- ask questions, take notes and be an advocate at medical appointments
- support healthy lifestyle choices

Caregivers

Women with heart failure face:
- more shortness of breath
- lower quality of life
- more hospitalizations

It’s the #1 cause of hospitalization among women and men age 65 and older

Only 1 in 4 participants in heart failure studies are women

Heart failure costs the U.S.

$32 billion a year