

HELP US HELP YOU

*across Suffolk
and north east Essex*

NHS

**Suffolk and
North East Essex**



Taking care of your heart

Your heart is a muscle. If your heart is not pumping as well as it should, then it cannot keep up with your body's need for oxygen especially during exercise. In most cases, heart failure cannot be cured, but taking medicines and changing some everyday habits may help you feel and function better.

Other names for heart failure are 'congestive heart failure' or 'CHF'. The term 'Chronic Heart Failure' is used to describe heart failure as a long term condition.

When you have a long-term condition, such as heart failure, it's important to take care of yourself and follow the advice of your clinical team so you can prevent your condition from worsening or getting complications. This guide will help you to know what you should be doing, and what to do if you start feeling worse. Our aim is to ensure that you get the care you need, when you need it.

Treatment



Heart failure is usually treated with healthy lifestyle changes and medication.

It is very important that you take your medicine regularly as it has been prescribed, unless side effects occur. If you do not take your tablets regularly your heart failure may get worse.

Symptoms that may indicate your heart failure is getting worse include the following:

- You may find it more difficult to breathe;
- You may wake up at night feeling more breathless;
- Your ankles may start to swell;
- You might notice rapid weight gain.

When to get medical advice



The NHS is under pressure and would encourage you to seek advice around self care first. For heart failure, this can include visiting the British Heart Foundation's website (www.bhf.org.uk), visiting pharmacies and following instructions given to you previously by your care team.

In line with this, if your symptoms do start to get worse or you develop new symptoms between your check-ups, early intervention can be helpful. You should only go to A&E if you are having significant difficulty breathing.

Please make sure you have adequate supplies of medication and monitor weather forecasts at regular intervals. If there are instances of bad weather and you are likely to struggle, please arrange for a relative or a friend to collect your medication on your behalf.

If you need to speak to a healthcare professional out of hours, then phone NHS 111. Alternatively, issues with medication supplies can often be dealt with by your local pharmacy.

Looking after yourself



It's very important to take good care of yourself if you have heart failure.



Have a healthy diet



A healthy, balanced diet can help improve your symptoms and general health. This should include:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables – aim for at least 5 portions a day
- meals based on starchy foods, such as potatoes, bread, rice or pasta
- some dairy or dairy alternatives
- some beans or pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other sources of protein
- low levels of saturated fat, salt and sugar

You may also be given advice about dietary changes that can specifically help with heart failure, such as limiting the amount of fluid you drink.

Exercise regularly



Regular physical activity can also help improve your symptoms and general health.

If you have heart failure, you should be offered an exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation programme.

These programmes usually run in hospitals or community clinics by teams that include nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and exercise specialists.

Before you start, you'll have an assessment to find out how much exercise you can safely do. A programme of exercise can then be tailored specifically for you.

The education part of the programme will give you information on healthy eating and practical ways to reduce the risk of further damage to your heart.

Stop smoking



If you smoke, stopping smoking can improve your overall health and reduce your risk of many other health problems.

Limit your alcohol consumption



You can usually continue to drink alcohol if you have heart failure, but it's advisable not to exceed the recommended limits of more than 14 alcohol units a week.

If your heart failure is directly related to drinking alcohol, you may be advised to stop entirely.

Get vaccinated



Heart failure can put a significant strain on your body and mean you're more vulnerable to infections.

Everyone with heart failure should be offered appropriate vaccinations such as COVID-19, flu and the one-off pneumococcal vaccination.

You can get these vaccinations at your GP practice or some local pharmacies that offer a vaccination service.

Regular reviews and monitoring



You'll have regular contact with your GP practice or care team to monitor your condition. These appointments may involve:

- talking about your symptoms, such as whether they're affecting your normal activities or are getting worse;
- a discussion about your medication, including any side effects;
- tests to monitor your health

It is also a good opportunity to ask any questions you have or raise any other issues you'd like to discuss with your care team.

You may be asked to help monitor your condition between appointments.

For example, your care team may suggest weighing yourself regularly so any changes in your weight, which could be a sign of a problem, are picked up quickly.

Contact your GP practice or care team if your symptoms are getting worse or you develop new symptoms.

Your care team will advise you about when and where to seek advice if there's a potential problem.

Travelling and driving



Travelling

Having heart failure shouldn't prevent you travelling or going on holiday, as long as you feel well enough and your condition is well controlled.

It may be advisable to avoid travelling to high altitudes or to hot, humid places because this may put extra strain on your heart.

Flying won't usually cause problems, but if your heart failure is severe, your legs and ankles may swell and breathing may become more difficult.

If you are flying, check the airline's website for instructions and, where appropriate, inform the airline of your condition. They may provide a wheelchair or electric car so you can avoid having to walk long distances at the airport.

If you're travelling and sitting still for a long time, either in a car, coach or on a plane, you should do simple exercises to reduce the risk of blood clots. Wearing flight socks or compression stockings while flying should also help.

It may be a good idea to take two sets of medication with you when you travel. Carry them in different places in case you lose one, and make a list of the medication you take and what it is for. Please give your practice reasonable time to arrange this and try to avoid waste by not ordering repeat medication the following month.

Having heart failure shouldn't stop you getting travel insurance, but you may have to find a specialist company that will insure you.

Driving

You may need to tell the DVLA if you have heart failure.

Read more about [heart failure and driving on GOV.UK](#).

Work and financial help



What happens if I can no longer work?

If you can't continue working because of heart failure, you may be able to claim disability and sickness benefits.

Find out more about benefits if you have a long-term illness or disability on [GOV.UK](#)

Help for carers



Carers may also be entitled to some benefits. Read more about www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/.

Caring for someone with heart failure



Looking after someone with heart failure can mean anything from helping with hospital or visits to GP practices and collecting prescriptions, to full-time caring.

There are many ways you can support someone with heart failure.

Heart failure can be disabling and distressing, and many people with the condition find it a huge relief to share their concerns and fears with someone.

As a carer, if you can attend GP practices and hospital appointments with the person with heart failure, you can encourage them to ask the right questions while you note down the answers. You could also provide the clinician with additional information or insights into the person's condition, which can be helpful for planning the right treatment.

Signs to look out for include:

- shortness of breath that isn't related to usual exercise or activity
- increased swelling of the legs or ankles
- significant weight gain over a few days
- waking up short of breath (particularly in the early hours of the morning)

Remember you can access healthcare services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If there is an urgent need, you can obtain medical advice by visiting 111 online - www.111.nhs.uk - or phoning NHS 111.

