

Fact Sheet for Medicare Beneficiaries: Understanding Heart Failure

What is heart failure?

Heart failure is a serious medical condition. It occurs when a weakened heart cannot pump blood through the body. As a result, the body doesn't get the oxygen and nutrients it needs to function normally.

What are the symptoms of heart failure?

The symptoms include:

- shortness of breath with normal activity or exercise
- difficulty breathing at rest or when lying flat in bed
- swollen ankles, legs and stomach
- unexplained weight gain
- dizziness, fatigue, weakness
- rapid or irregular heartbeats

These symptoms can be mild to severe, depending on how weak your heart is.

How serious is heart failure?

Heart failure is the leading cause for hospitalization in people over age 65. Approximately one-third of older adults with heart failure can die from the disease in one year after diagnosis.

How is heart failure diagnosed?

Your doctor will start by listening to your heart and asking you questions about your symptoms and medical history. Your doctor may order:

- blood tests
- chest x-ray
- echocardiogram
- ejection fraction (EF) test
- electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG)

Be sure to ask your physician about the results of your tests and need for further treatment.

How is heart failure treated?

Your doctor may prescribe medications, such as ACE inhibitors or ACEIs, to treat your heart failure. Ask your doctor if you're a candidate for an ACE inhibitor.

What if I'm hospitalized with heart failure?

When you've been in the hospital and are ready to be discharged, you should receive written instructions about your medications, weight monitoring, activity level, follow-up appointment and what to do if symptoms worsen. These instructions will help you live better with heart failure.

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