

*Leading Health Care  
In The 21st Century*



**Guidelines for Living with**  
*Congestive Heart Failure*



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# What does congestive heart failure (CHF) mean?

It sounds scary so...

It is important to realize what CHF does **NOT** mean:

- CHF does NOT mean that your heart has stopped working
- CHF does NOT mean that your heart is about to stop working
- CHF does NOT mean that you have had a heart attack or are about to have a heart attack

Having CHF simply means that your heart's pumping power is weaker than it should be. Your heart is working harder than ever to keep blood flowing through your body. More importantly, **CHF can be managed**. Millions of people are living with CHF right now. Together with your health care team, **you** can make your heart's job easier and help yourself feel better, too.

## Causes of CHF

Many different health problems may cause CHF, including:

- A heart attack or reduced blood supply to the heart
- Heart valve disease
- Cardiomyopathy - weakened heart muscle for reasons we may not know
- High blood pressure
- Viral infection of the heart
- Excessive alcohol
- Kidney disease
- Lung disease



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**Symptoms of CHF usually occur gradually and often get worse without treatment.**

Some examples of what you may feel are:

- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Sudden weight gain
- Fluid build up especially in the legs, hands, stomach and lungs
- Inability to lie flat because of shortness of breath, requiring more and more pillows to raise your head and shoulders
- Waking up in the night with severe shortness of breath
- A persistent dry cough that is usually more bothersome at night
- Gradual reduction in activity due to shortness of breath or fatigue
- Angina or chest discomfort
- Loss of appetite
- Slowed mental responses or confusion



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## **You and your health care team will manage CHF by:**

- Taking medications regularly to help your heart work better.  
Common medications for CHF may include:
  - ❖ An ACE Inhibitor: examples of these are Fosinopril, Enalapril, Lisinopril and many others
  - ❖ Beta Blockers: examples of these are Metoprolol, Carvedilol and some others
  - ❖ Diuretics (water pills): examples of these are: Furosemide, Bumetanide, Torsemide
  - ❖ Additional medications for CHF are determined according to your specific need and may include Digoxin, Spironolactone, Hydralazine or long acting nitroglycerine preparations.
- YOUR CHF medications, as well as other medication you may need for other reasons will be listed for you.
- Regular check-ups and routine tests. You will be given appointments for these.



- Reduce salt intake - salt causes your body to retain water, which increases the work of your heart. A dietician may speak with you through your primary care doctor or advanced practice nurse. However, a good place to start is by not using the saltshaker at all and avoiding prepackaged or processed foods.
- Reduce or eliminate alcohol, including beer, wine, or hard liquor.
- Not all patients are advised to restrict fluid, as it may not be necessary. However, if you have been advised to reduce fluids, you will be told a specific amount. If it is two quarts/day (a common choice), here is a simple suggestion as to how to do that. We advise that you:
  - ❖ Get a two-quart pitcher and fill it with water each morning. You may wish to keep it in the refrigerator.
  - ❖ If you have a glass of water, fill the glass from the pitcher itself and drink it.
  - ❖ If you have some other beverage such as a glass of milk, then enjoy the glass of milk and then...
  - ❖ Fill the same glass with about the same amount of water from the pitcher. Then throw that water away.
  - ❖ The milk is just an example and can be applied to a cup of coffee etc.
  - ❖ When the 2-quart pitcher of water is empty, we ask that you not drink any more fluid for that day.
- Regular exercise only as prescribed by your doctor.
- Pace your activities. Try not to do too much at one time. Alternate rest and activity. Do not push yourself beyond a feeling of tiredness.
- Ask your doctor, advanced practice nurse or pharmacist for advice on nonprescription medications.



- Avoid high sodium nonprescription medications like:
  - ❖ Antacids
  - ❖ Cough syrups
  - ❖ Laxatives
- If you have been ordered Nitroglycerine, you need to know how to take it properly:
  - ❖ If you get chest discomfort, sit down and stop whatever it is that you are doing.
  - ❖ If the discomfort does not go away quickly, you need to take one Nitro tablet and let it dissolve under your tongue for five full minutes.
  - ❖ If the discomfort is not gone or significantly better, you need to place a second Nitro tab under your tongue and let it dissolve a five full minutes.
  - ❖ If the discomfort is not gone or significantly better, you need to place a third Nitro tablet under your tongue and let it dissolve a full five minutes.
  - ❖ If the discomfort is not gone at this time, you need to come to the hospital.



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It is important for you to know when you need to call for help. After discharge from the hospital, you need to call your doctor or advanced practice nurse if the following occurs:

- Increasing shortness of breath
- Increasing cough
- Weight gain of three pounds or more
- Increasing swelling of your ankles, hands and feet (shoes, socks and rings become tight)
- Pain, pressure or discomfort in your chest. The pain may spread up to your shoulders, neck, or jaw, down either or both arms, or to the back or stomach.
- Persistent dizziness or any falls
- Irregular pulse or your heart beating very fast and hard
- Restlessness or confusion
- Marked loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting



YOUR provider's name is: \_\_\_\_\_

and phone is: \_\_\_\_\_



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CHF is a condition, which can often be treated with great effectiveness. Your cooperation is important for your treatment to be effective. Here are some things you can do to help yourself:

- Come in for your appointments. If you miss an appointment, call for follow up.
- Take your medications as directed. Develop a system for taking your medications on time. If you are having a problem with a medication, call your doctor or advanced practice nurse to discuss it. There are lots of ways we can work with you to help you with problems. **PLEASE DO NOT JUST STOP A MEDICINE WITHOUT TELLING YOUR DOCTOR OR ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSE. THIS CAN BE DANGEROUS.**
- Keep active but use common sense. Do not push too hard. Use an exercise program **ONLY** if you have been told to do so by your doctor or advanced practice nurse.
- Watch for symptoms of CHF and report them promptly when they occur.
- Weigh yourself every day. This is very necessary to help keep control of possible fluid overload. This is how it should be done. When you first get up in the morning:
  - Pass your water
  - Get on the scale and weigh yourself
  - Write the weight number down in your record
  - Bring the record of your daily weights when you see your doctor or advanced practice nurse
- Follow your doctor or advanced practice nurse's advice about fluid intake.
- Relax, put your feet up. It helps keep the swelling in your legs and feet down.



- If TED stockings have been ordered, put them on in the morning and take them off at night.
- Please be careful. Avoid bumping or injuring your skin. Skin that is swollen is fragile and may breakdown. If you notice any skin breakdown, call your doctor or advanced practice nurse.
- Change positions slowly to avoid becoming faint or lightheaded. It is important that you get up slowly after you have been lying down.
- Avoid extremes of hot and cold (including hot tubs). They cause your heart to work harder. In cold or windy weather, wear a scarf across your nose and mouth to warm the air. In hot and humid weather, you will probably need air conditioning. Watch for the “dew point” on your weather station or turn to the weather channel, which has that information on the “8s” of every hour. If the dew point is over 55, you may feel the need for air conditioning; if the dew point is over 60, you will be uncomfortable; if the dew point is over 65, you need to be in air conditioning.
- Know the signs and symptoms of potassium loss: this may result from the water pills. Some symptoms include:
  - Muscle cramps
  - Muscle weakness
  - Irritability
  - Irregular heartbeat
  - Please get a Pneumonia vaccine if you have not already had one.
  - Please get a flu shot every fall.



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These are general guidelines to help you take care of congestive heart failure. You will be given instructions specifically for you.

For further information, we suggest contacting the American Heart Association (AHA):

**American Heart Association**  
7272 Grenville Avenue  
Dallas, TX 75321-4596  
1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721)  
or contact your local AHA office.





## **We also suggest information on these websites:**

[www.aha.org](http://www.aha.org) - AHA website

[www.hfesa.org](http://www.hfesa.org) - Heart Failure Society of America website

[www.va.gov/visns/visn02/vet/ed/index.cfm](http://www.va.gov/visns/visn02/vet/ed/index.cfm) - VA patient information website

[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/) - government health information website

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### **VA Healthcare On The Web**

[www.va.gov/visns/visn02](http://www.va.gov/visns/visn02)

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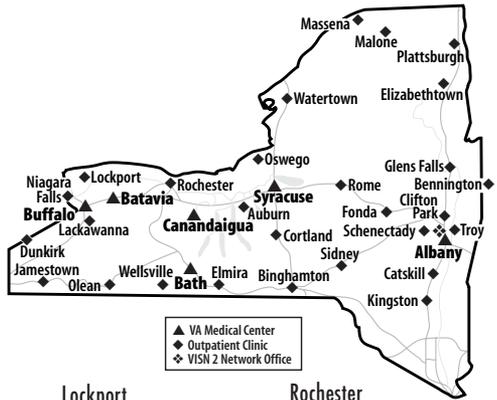
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