

Oxford University Hospitals **NHS**
NHS Trust

Cardiac Rehabilitation

Heart Failure

Information for patients



What is heart failure?

The term 'heart failure' can sound rather alarming. It does not mean that your heart has completely failed or that it is about to stop, it is simply a medical term used when your heart muscle is not working as efficiently as it should. This may be because the muscle has weakened and is not able to pump strongly, or because the muscle has become stiff and is unable to relax to allow blood into the pumping chamber. It may also be due to one or more of the heart valves not working properly, or because of an abnormal heart rhythm, putting strain on your heart muscle.

The heart pumps oxygen and nutrients around the body. If you have heart failure this means that your heart's ability to function as an effective pump is reduced. The reduced blood supply to your kidneys means that they are not able to filter waste products and fluid efficiently. This means that fluid can build up in your body, resulting in swollen feet, ankles and legs. If fluid builds up in your lungs it can cause shortness of breath.

This information booklet is intended for people who have heart failure which is NOT caused by muscle weakening.

What causes heart failure?

There are many different causes of heart failure. These include:

- heart attack and coronary heart disease
- high blood pressure
- heart valve disease
- infection of the heart muscle
- excessive alcohol consumption
- abnormalities of the heart rhythm.

Sometimes it is difficult to pinpoint the cause of heart failure.

What are the symptoms of heart failure?

Symptoms include the following:

Shortness of breath, coughing, difficulty in breathing

You might notice these symptoms more when carrying out some form of activity or when taking exercise. However, you may also become short of breath when carrying out light everyday tasks or even when resting. Waking up at night feeling breathless is quite common. You may find that it helps to prop yourself up with plenty of pillows rather than lying flat.

Tiredness and weakness

When your heart is not pumping properly it has difficulty sending enough oxygen and glucose to your muscles through your bloodstream. This can result in you feeling tired when carrying out light activities or even when resting.

Swollen feet, ankles, legs and abdomen

The inefficient pumping action of your heart results in your kidneys not being able to get rid of excess fluid from your body. As a result of this, you may find that parts of your lower body may swell (such as your feet, ankles, legs and abdomen).

Weight gain

This may happen slowly over a period of time, or it can happen very quickly over a day or two. It is normally due to a build-up of excess fluid.

How is heart failure treated?

The symptoms of heart failure can be relieved to a certain extent with medication. You may also need treatment for the cause of your heart failure, if this is known.

The main treatment for heart failure that is not caused by a weakened heart muscle is diuretic therapy (often referred to as 'water tablets'). These encourage your body to get rid of excess salt and fluid – there is more detailed information on diuretics later in this booklet.

Lifestyle changes

There are also things you can do yourself to help manage your heart failure – small changes can really improve the way you feel.

The main things to consider are:

- keeping an eye on the amount of fluid in your body by weighing yourself every day
- keeping an eye on your fluid intake
- stopping smoking
- reducing salt in your diet (to around 3 grams or ½ teaspoon a day)
- stopping or cutting down on alcohol if advised to do so
- reducing your weight, if necessary
- remaining as active as possible
- having a yearly 'flu-jab' and one-off pneumonia vaccination.

Monitoring your daily weight

It is important to weigh yourself every day after you have been to the toilet and before you get dressed and have breakfast.

If, over a period of 3 days, you notice that your weight has increased by around 4lbs/2kgs or more, please speak to your GP. This may be a sign that your body is retaining (holding on to) excess fluid. This can cause you to become short of breath, or more short of breath than usual.

Fluid intake

Excess fluid can build up in your body when you have heart failure, and we will give you diuretics to treat this. In order to get the best relief from your symptoms it is important that you limit how much fluid you take in (from hot and cold drinks and also foods with high fluid content, for example soup or ice-cream). Your doctor may have asked you to restrict your fluid intake. If not, you should still generally limit yourself to a maximum of 1.5 litres (2-3 pints) in 24 hours. If you are losing a lot of fluid for some reason (for example, if the weather is very hot or you have

vomiting or diarrhoea) you should seek medical advice. You may need to stop your diuretics until this passes. If you do not stop taking the diuretics, you will be at risk of becoming dehydrated. This can damage your kidneys. It is important that you continue to monitor your weight and symptoms during this time.

Smoking

If you smoke and you have heart failure, you have probably been advised to stop. Smoking causes many health problems and it also reduces the amount of oxygen that can be carried by your blood, adding to the impact of your heart failure. Please speak to your GP if you need help and support to stop smoking.

Salt

It is important that you try to reduce the amount of salt you eat, as too much salt will encourage your body to retain fluid. Excess fluid can cause you to become breathless. Avoid salt substitutes such as Lo Salt, as these often contain potassium which can cause an imbalance of salts in your blood and problems with your heart rhythm. Try to limit your use of processed foods, as these often contain a lot of salt. Choose products with a low salt content.

Alcohol

Your doctor may have advised you to stop drinking alcohol completely, in which case you should follow their advice. If you have not been told to stop completely and you wish to drink alcohol, you can do so as long as you stay within the recommended guidelines (shown below). It is important that you take note of the daily as well as weekly guidelines, and remember that alcohol counts towards your daily fluid intake.

The government advises that men may consume up to 21 units of alcohol per week, with no more than 4 units in one day, ensuring that they have at least 2 alcohol free days a week. Women may consume up to 14 units of alcohol per week, with no more than 3 units a day, ensuring that they have at least 2 alcohol free days a week,

One unit equals:

- half a pint of 3.5% beer or lager (BE AWARE: many beers, lagers and ciders contain 5-9% alcohol)
- one very small glass (125ml) of 8% wine (many glasses of wine contain 175-250ml, and the typical strength in the UK is 12%, so most glasses of wine are more than 2 units. A standard bottle of 12% wine in the UK contains 9 units)
- one pub measure (50ml) of sherry
- one single measure (25ml) of spirits – i.e. whisky, gin, vodka, brandy.

Remember – home measures are often much more generous than pub measures!

Losing weight

Being overweight can put extra strain on your heart. Losing any excess weight you carry may help to reduce breathlessness and fatigue. We, or your GP, may be able to refer you to the cardiac rehabilitation team. You may be able to get professional advice and support for sensible weight loss through your practice nurse or local pharmacist.

Activity levels

Moderate exercise is beneficial and if carried out regularly can contribute to a feeling of wellbeing. Going for a walk every day is a good way of being active, as it is a safe and convenient form of exercise. Contact your GP if you need further advice about which exercises you could try. A good rule of thumb is that you should always have enough breath to be able to talk comfortably whilst exercising. You must STOP if you experience unexpected shortness of breath or chest pain.

The Oxfordshire Cardiac Rehabilitation Department offer a program for people with heart failure. This includes education sessions and supervised activity programmes which are tailored to your individual needs and abilities. If you would like to be referred to this service, please ask your GP to refer you. Please note, this service is only available if you have a GP in Oxfordshire.

If you do not live in Oxfordshire, your GP will be able to advise you if there is similar service in your local area.

Having the yearly flu jab

Flu can develop into pneumonia very quickly in people who have heart failure. Ask your GP for advice about having the yearly flu jab, as well as the one-off pneumonia vaccination.

Sexual activity

Many people with heart disease avoid sexual intercourse because they believe it is dangerous. There are certainly lots of myths and misunderstandings about this.

As far as heart failure is concerned it is difficult to be specific with advice about sexual activity as everybody is different; things that affect one person with heart failure may not necessarily affect the next person. However, it is safe to have sex when you have heart failure, as long as your symptoms do not make this too uncomfortable for you. Some people with heart failure lose interest in sex, which they can find distressing. If your condition is severe, you may find that you cannot carry out sexual intercourse at all because it causes you to become very short of breath. If you have any worries or difficulties do mention them to your GP.

Driving

Group 1: (Private cars)

Generally you may drive if you have heart failure, as long as you are not having symptoms that may distract your attention. You do not need to inform the DVLA about your heart failure but it is wise to let your insurance company know.

Group 2: LGV (Large Goods Vehicles); PCV (Passenger Carrying Vehicles); C1 (Medium Goods); D1 (Minibus).

You should inform the DVLA who will give you further information.

You are likely to be disqualified from driving if you are having symptoms. Relicensing may be permitted providing that you can meet certain requirements.

Travel

There is no reason why you cannot travel or go on holiday abroad but it may be best to avoid high altitudes as well as hot and humid places. If you are going to a hot climate you may need to increase your fluid intake. If your heart failure is severe, long haul flights can cause problems, so if you are planning a holiday ask for advice from your GP.

If you need help...

If you notice any of the following, seek advice from your GP:

- you are more breathless than usual
- you become short of breath when lying down
- you wake at night short of breath
- you notice that you are gaining weight (as described on page 4)
- your ankles, legs or abdomen become more swollen

If you experience any of the following you must dial 999 for an ambulance:

- becoming extremely short of breath
- experiencing chest tightness or chest pain for the first time
- experiencing your usual angina which does not go away after two uses of your GTN spray/tablets, with a five minute wait after each use.

Diuretics (water tablets)

Common tablets/capsules:

Loop diuretics such as:	Bumetanide, Furosemide
Potassium sparing diuretics such as:	Amiloride, Spironolactone Eplerenone
Thiazide diuretics such as:	Bendroflumethiazide, Metolazone
Combinations such as:	Co-amilofruse, Frumil, Moduretic, Triamco

Why are they used?

Diuretics can be of great benefit as they help to remove excess fluid from your body; this will give you relief from shortness of breath. Diuretics work by helping with the movement of body salts in your blood as they go through your kidneys, causing you to pass more urine. Some diuretics are also used to reduce blood pressure. The amount of diuretic that you need to keep you at your ideal fluid level may change as a natural part of your illness – it is quite common for diuretic doses to increase and decrease as your symptoms change.

Side-effects

If your blood pressure drops a little too much you may feel light-headed or dizzy. There is a risk that the tablets may remove too much fluid from your body. If this happens, you may feel very dry-mouthed and thirsty or find that you are experiencing new or worsening dizziness, particularly when standing. If you are experiencing problems, please continue to take the medication but speak to your GP as soon as possible.

Note

Some diuretics also remove potassium along with the urine. Potassium is one of the salts found in the body and we need a certain amount to remain healthy. It is therefore common to be prescribed a “potassium sparing” diuretic which allows more potassium to remain in your body. Alternatively, you may be prescribed potassium supplements.

Over-the-counter medicines

Some medicines that can be bought in shops may make heart failure worse and are best avoided. These are:

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen. This is a common treatment for aches and pains and is found in many brand name medicines such as Nurofen, Cuprofen and Galprofen. Always ask your pharmacist to check that anything you buy does not contain ibuprofen or any similar

ingredients. It is sometimes found in pain relieving rubs (such as Ibuleve Gel). These are less likely to cause harm but it is still worth discussing them with your pharmacist or GP.

Many **cold and flu remedies** contain ingredients that you should avoid. Speak with your GP or pharmacist to find out which one is safe to take.

Some herbal remedies, including **St John's Wort** should be avoided as they can interfere with prescribed medications.

Please always check with your GP or your pharmacist before taking any medicines that you have not been prescribed.

Prescription medicines

Your pharmacist is always available for advice if you have any questions about your prescribed medicines. It will help if you take your medicines list along with you.

You will find it useful to talk to your pharmacist if you are having difficulties in paying for your prescriptions as it may be cheaper to purchase a 3-month or 12-month pre-payment certificate. This will cover the cost not only of your heart failure medicines, but any other prescription medicines that you take or are prescribed in that time. This can work out much cheaper in the long term.

Your pharmacist will be pleased to give you advice.

Useful websites and telephone numbers

The British Heart Foundation

The British Heart Foundation is the largest independent charity committed to the fight against heart disease.

Heart information helpline: 0300 330 33 11

Website: www.bhf.org.uk

Health Talk Online

This is a very useful website. It explores a wide variety of personal experiences of health and illness including heart failure. It also provides reliable information on treatment choices and offers comprehensive details of support groups and other useful organisations.

Website: www.healthtalkonline.org/

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE)

Nationally approved information and guidance for people with heart failure, carers and the public. Once you have reached this site search for the section on heart failure.

Website: www.nice.org.uk

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)

Information about driving requirements and medical conditions.

Driver medical enquiries

Tel: 0300 790 6806

Website: www.gov.uk/contact-the-dvla

Help with health costs

NHS Choices has information about help with health costs, such as NHS prescriptions, NHS dental charges and travel costs to receive NHS treatment under the care of a consultant. You may be able to get help if you are receiving a government benefit or credit, are pregnant, retired or on a low income.

Telephone 0300 330 1341 for queries about medical exemption certificates.

Telephone 0300 330 1341 for queries about pre-payment certificates.

Telephone 0300 330 1347 for queries about tax credit certificates.

For all other queries call 0300 330 1343

Website: www.nhs.uk/nhsengland/healthcosts/pages/help-with-health-costs.aspx

Expert Patients Programme

This is a free self-management course for adults with one or more long-term chronic condition such as asthma, arthritis, epilepsy and heart failure. It is run by people who have personal experience of a long-term medical condition. Please contact your GP for details of your local group or visit their website.

Website: www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/doctors/Pages/expert-patients-programme.aspx

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers

An independent charity offering advice, information and support to carers.

Website: www.carers.org/

Carers Trust Centre for carers in Oxfordshire:

Tel: 01865 260 280

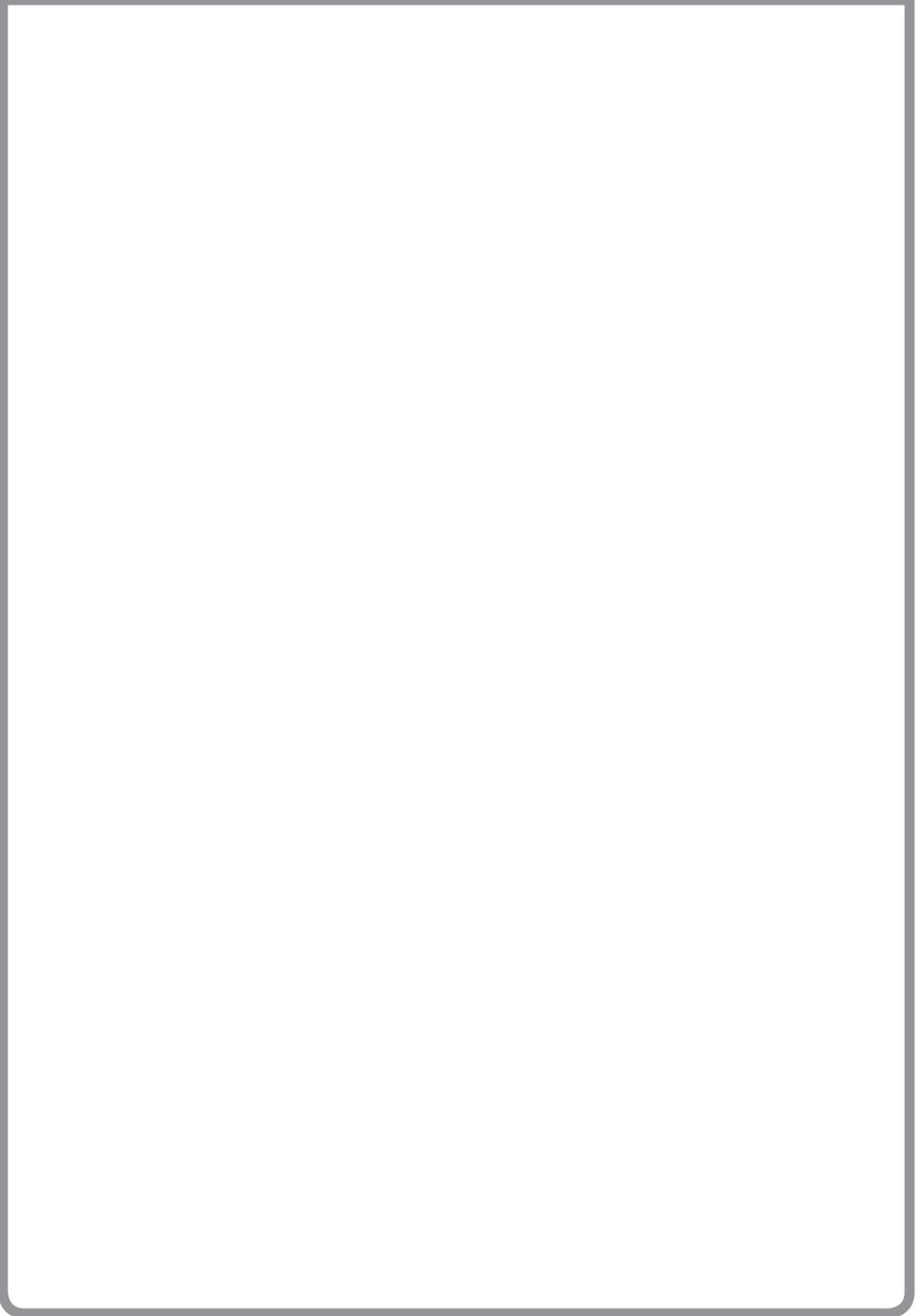
NHS 111 Service

For health advice and reassurance, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Dial 111 from any landline or mobile phone. Calls are free.

Notes

Notes

A large, empty rectangular box with rounded corners, intended for taking notes. The box is white and occupies most of the page below the header.

Notes

Notes

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**

Updated by Helen Nolte, Heart Failure Specialist Nurse Practitioner
February 2015
Review: February 2018
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information

