



## What is congestive heart failure?

Congestive heart failure is a condition in which the heart muscle is weakened and the pumping function of the heart decreases. Congestive heart failure doesn't mean that your heart has stopped - it just means that it is not working as efficiently to move blood through the body.

Certain conditions can damage the heart muscle so that the heart pumps with less force and as a result less blood moves with each contraction. Blood eventually backs up into the lungs causing congestion. Since the blood is not being pumped effectively to the organs, less oxygen is being delivered and the body's tissues are not functioning optimally. An example is the kidneys, which may not excrete urine as they should and excess fluid may settle in different parts of the body.

Usually congestive heart failure is the result of another underlying problem such as coronary artery disease, heart attack, hypertension (high blood pressure), some type of viral infection affecting the heart muscle, leaking of the heart valves or a condition known as cardiomyopathy. In this condition there is a generalized weakness of the heart muscle with poor pumping ability and enlargement of the chambers of the heart.

The symptoms of congestive heart failure are varied depending on the underlying causes, which chamber of the heart is in failure, and the severity. These symptoms include:

- shortness of breath when you exert yourself
- wheezing
- coughing / congestion
- weakness / fatigue
- problems breathing especially at night while lying down
- waking up at night coughing or gasping for breath
- rapid heart beat
- dizziness
- swollen ankles or feet

The diagnosis of congestive heart failure is frequently made by evaluating patients' clinical symptoms, physical exam, EKG, and an ultrasound of the heart (echocardiogram). The treatment plan for congestive heart failure is designed to correct the underlying problem and to alleviate some of your symptoms and make you more comfortable so as to improve your activity tolerance and the quality of life. This would include medications to help your heart work better by improving the way it pumps and by relieving the congestion. Some of the commonly prescribed medications include:

- Vasodilators (helps blood flow more easily, lowering your blood pressure and decreasing the workload on the heart)
- Diuretics or "water pills" (helps to rid your body of excess water that may have collected in the lungs or in your lower extremities)
- Digitalis (may be prescribed to help your heart contract or pump with more strength. When the heart contracts with more force it can pump more blood with each heart beat. In this way more oxygen rich blood is being delivered to the body's organs. Sometimes this drug is also given to help regulate an irregular or rapid heartbeat.
- a Beta Blocker such as Carvedilol (Coreg) (may be used to block the body's response to certain stimulation that may damage the heart further by causing it to work too hard)