

Enjoy Life, Even With Heart Failure

The 5 most important things to do

SOME 6.7 MILLION Americans live with heart failure, a chronic condition in which the heart can't pump as well as it should. This can lead to fluid buildup in your lungs and limbs, shortness of breath, fatigue, and swelling in areas like your legs. "I describe it as an inefficiency of the heart," says Bethany Austin, MD, co-medical director of the Heart Failure Program and Heart Failure Quality at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute in Kansas City, Mo.

A few strategies can improve your quality of life and help keep the condition from worsening. "Heart failure means your heart needs some help doing its normal job," Austin says. In addition to following a treatment plan, which may include drugs to reduce fluid and help your heart pump more effectively, try the following.

Check Your Meds

Some medications for heart failure, such as diuretics, can make you tired, while beta-blockers may affect your sleep. Ask



your doctor about potential modifications if you think that's the case. (But don't stop taking prescribed drugs on your own.)

Balance Activity and Rest

Exercise can boost your energy and help you breathe and sleep better. But it's important to know when to put your feet up or nap. Ask your doctor what's safe and start slowly, perhaps marching in place for 5 to 15 minutes. Rest if you feel lightheaded, dizzy, short of breath, or weak, says Austin Workman, ACSM-EP, CCRP, an exercise specialist at Saint Luke's Mid America Heart Institute. (Rest in a chair or prop

yourself up with pillows rather than lying down.) Cardiac rehabilitation, which includes supervised exercise, can help you build endurance.

Try 'Breathe Easier' Tactics

If you're short of breath, it's helpful to do breathing exercises—such as slowly inhaling through your nose and out through pursed lips—until you can comfortably catch your breath again. Some research suggests that breath training and exercises that incorporate deep breathing, such as yoga and tai chi, may be useful in the long term. Ask your doctor.

Keep Fluid From Building Up

Check for fluid buildup by weighing yourself daily. Call your doctor if you gain 2 to 3 pounds in a day or 5 in a week. And consume only as much sodium and fluid as your doctor recommends. "Things that melt at room temperature, like ice cream," count as fluids, says Laura Harnish, RDN, a clinical dietitian on the Outpatient Nutrition Counseling Services team at UPMC Presbyterian Shadyside in Pittsburgh.

Get Better Sleep

Sleep problems are common among those with heart failure, and up to 75 percent may have sleep apnea, where breathing stops many times during sleep. (See page 4 for sleep tips.) If you suspect sleep apnea, ask a doctor about being tested, says Brittany Palmer, MD, a cardiologist at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Heart and Vascular Institute and a clinical instructor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh.

FEELING DOWN? TRY THIS.

Living with heart failure can certainly affect your mood. "There's a huge emotional component," says Brittany Palmer, MD. Managing the condition can be stressful, and you may have fears about the possibility of

worsening symptoms, which may interfere with sleep and make you feel anxious or depressed. A low mood, in turn, can make sticking with healthy habits harder. Experts advise telling your doctor

about your feelings and struggles and reaching out to supportive friends and family. "People are more likely to help you than to judge you," Palmer says. Counseling, notably cognitive behavioral therapy—which focuses on changing your feelings

and responses to challenging situations—may also help. In fact, a review of studies published in 2023 in the *Journal of International Medical Research* suggests that CBT can ease a person's mood, especially when therapy is done in person, not online.