

CARDIOLOGY

5 WARNING SIGNS OF HEART FAILURE

How heart failure occurs and its common symptoms.



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Heart failure, sometimes known as congestive heart failure, does not mean your heart has completely stopped beating. What it means is that your heart cannot pump blood as well as a healthy one.

Blood travels through the heart and body at a slower pace, and pressure in the heart accelerates. So the heart cannot pump enough blood to give your body the oxygen it needs. The chambers of the heart may respond by stretching to hold more blood to pump through the body or by becoming stiff and thickened. This causes heart muscle walls to weaken, and blood cannot be pumped efficiently throughout the body. Your kidneys react by causing your body to hold on to water and salt, leading to fluid build-up in other parts of your body.

Heart failure can be sudden or ongoing. It often develops due to the damage wrought on

the heart by conditions such as hypertension, coronary artery disease, a previous heart attack, abnormal heart rhythms, congenital heart defects, or diabetes. Other risk factors include obesity, alcohol and tobacco abuse. Heart failure can involve the left, right or both sides of your heart. Generally, it begins with the left side — specifically the left ventricle, your heart's main pumping chamber.

Common symptoms

Below are five warning signs of heart failure:

Shortness of breath This refers to breathlessness during activity, at rest, or while sleeping, which may come on suddenly and wake you up. People with heart failure often have difficulty breathing while lying flat. You may need to prop up your head and





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upper body on two pillows. You may also wake up feeling tired, anxious or restless. Breathlessness occurs when blood backs up into the pulmonary veins (the vessels that return blood from the lungs to the heart) because the heart is unable to keep up with the supply. This causes fluid to leak into the lungs causing lung congestion.

Fluid and water retention (oedema)

Accumulation of excess fluid in the body tissues gives rise to weight gain or swelling in the feet, ankles, legs or abdomen. Your shoes and socks become tight — as blood flow out of the heart slows, blood returning to the heart through the veins backs up, causing fluid to accumulate in the tissues. The kidneys become less able to eliminate sodium and water, which also causes fluid and water retention in the tissues. Bloating in the stomach may give rise to loss of appetite or nausea. Fluid retention can also result in an increased urge to urinate during the night as the body attempts to get rid of excess fluid.

Fatigue You may frequently feel tired or light-headed, and have trouble with daily activities such as climbing stairs, carrying groceries and walking. This occurs because the heart cannot pump enough blood to the organs and muscles. Less blood in your major organs and muscles leaves you feeling exhausted. Less blood to the brain can cause dizziness and even fainting.

Increased heart rate The heart beats faster to pump enough blood to the body, causing a rapid or irregular heartbeat. Heart palpitations, which feel like your heart is racing or throbbing, may occur.

Persistent coughing or wheezing Fluid build-up in the lungs (pulmonary oedema) and in and around the airways can cause wheezing or persistent coughing that produces white or pink blood-tinged mucus.

If you observe any of these red flags, see a doctor as soon as possible. With appropriate and timely care, you can keep the condition under control. While not all conditions that cause heart failure can be reversed, treatments can alleviate the symptoms and prolong your life. Introducing lifestyle changes, such as exercising regularly, reducing sodium intake and managing stress, can help improve the quality of your life too. 