

Healthy Habits Offer Hope for Heart Failure

An estimated 4.8 million Americans have heart failure, and its increasing prevalence has made it a major chronic condition in the United States.



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Heat failure is a condition in which the heart gradually loses its ability to pump enough blood through the body. Heart failure is the country's most rapidly growing cardiovascular disorder and is the leading cause of hospitalization in the United States.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Many factors can increase the risk for heart failure. One is simply getting older. This is because the heart naturally loses some of its pumping ability with age.

However, heart failure is usually caused by an underlying heart problem. The most common causes are hypertension and coronary artery disease, said Scott H. Fertels, D.O., a cardiologist on staff at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center. Because of this, heart failure is linked to other traditional cardiovascular risk factors, such as diabetes, high cholesterol levels, obesity and smoking.

MANY POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS

If the heart becomes less efficient as a pump, the body will try to compensate for it, causing other symptoms, Dr. Fertels said. Some of the most common symptoms include:

- shortness of breath;
- excessive fatigue;
- chronic coughing;

- swelling of the feet, hands, legs, ankles and/or the abdomen — caused by fluid retention;
- sudden weight gain;
- waking during the night with a choking feeling.

HOW TO CUT YOUR RISK

Dr. Fertels suggests the following strategies can lessen the risk of developing heart failure:

- Manage diabetes and blood pressure.
- Control cholesterol levels.
- Do not smoke.
- Avoid alcohol, or drink only in moderation.
- Stay at a healthy weight.
- Keep active.
- Eat a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet, and follow any other special dietary instructions your doctor has given you. For example, Dr. Fertels recommends that patients at risk for heart failure limit their intake of fats and salt.

For people who already have heart failure, taking prescribed medications and practicing healthy habits, such as lowering salt intake, monitoring daily weight and regular medical checkups, can go a long way toward keeping the condition from worsening, Dr. Fertels said. ■

Maintaining proper blood pressure is essential for everyone, not just those with heart disease. Get a FREE guide, *Blood Pressure — Keeping It Under Control*, by calling 1-888-LOURDES (568-7337).

