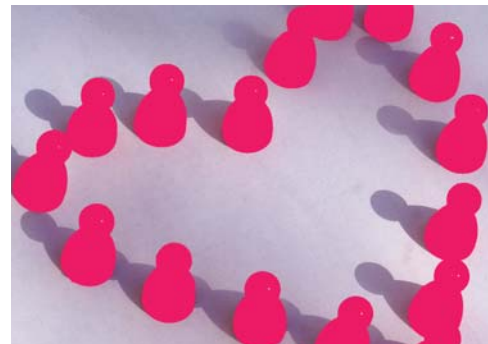


## HEART FAILURE – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Source: Stephanie Hofschlaeger / pixelio.de

### DEAR PATIENT,

Heart failure normally develops as a consequence of other disorders, for instance high blood pressure or a heart attack. This information is intended for men and women who suffer from heart failure, their family members and close friends. It should help you gain a first impression of your illness.

### ▶ WHAT IS HEART FAILURE?

The heart is a muscle that is roughly the size of a fist, and it is hollow inside. The muscle walls are particularly thick to enable it to function as a pump. Each time the heart beats, blood is pumped from the heart into the body.

The medical term for heart failure is cardiac insufficiency. This term is used when the heart is no longer capable of supplying the body with sufficient blood. This means the body has a poorer supply of oxygen.

### ▶ SYMPTOMS

Early signs of heart failure are:

- general fatigue
- reduced ability to cope
- rapid fatigue when doing physical work

Sometimes water is retained in the body. Your socks feel tight or your waistband digs in although you're not eating more than before. You may notice water retention in other parts of the body, too. Patients sometimes experience shortness of breath even when doing lighter tasks. This is not necessarily serious and can be treated. Some patients only experience one of these symptoms, others several. The symptoms of heart failure may differ slightly from patient to patient.

### ▶ TREATMENT

Treatment varies depending on the severity of your heart failure. Very often patients have to take several medicines. It is very important to tell your doctor quickly about any side effects you experience.

Besides treatment with medicines, there may be additional options for some patients, for instance a pacemaker. In some cases specific surgery may help. Often, through your behaviour you can help to considerably alleviate the symptoms, too (see overleaf).

Detailed information on the individual treatment options as well as their advantages and disadvantages can be found in the Patient Guideline (see box overleaf).

### ▶ WHAT YOU SHOULD PAY ATTENTION TO

The symptoms of heart failure can change. There may be stable but also unstable periods of the disorder.

If you notice these symptoms for the first time or if they worsen, you should contact your doctor:

- if you notice an increase of more than 2.5 kg in the space of a week in your daily weight record
- if you experience swelling of your ankles or calves
- if you experience a seizure-like rapid heartbeat
- if your heart doesn't just skip a beat but also beats irregularly for a few minutes
- if you experience pain or a feeling of tightness in the chest
- if you develop a fever (temperature above 38.5 °C)
- if you have a persistent cough
- if you have watery diarrhoea
- if you have to vomit
- if you are short of breath when you exert yourself
- if you have to sit upright in a chair to breathe more easily
- if you need several pillows at night

## ▶ Heart failure

### ▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- If you suffer or have suffered from water retention, keeping a record of your weight is very important. Record your weight daily over a certain period of time. If it increases this can be a sign of a worsening heart function.
- Talk to your doctor about the right amount of fluid you should drink daily.
- In the past people with heart failure were advised to add very little salt to their food. However, no studies have confirmed that radically cutting out salt from your diet has any major impact. Nonetheless, a healthy diet for people with heart failure should not contain any heavily salted foods like salami or crisps. Ready-made dishes and mixed spices should not be eaten at all or only rarely.
- As serious problems frequently occur when you have heart failure and, in addition, a lung infection, you should have an annual flu vaccination. Ask your doctor about the advantages and disadvantages.
- Sport and physical exercise have a favourable impact on the health of many patients. The complaints become less severe. If at all possible, you should regularly practise a sport. You could also join a cardiac sports group. In order to be sure that there are no health constraints check with your doctor first.
- If you don't play a sport, try to go for a walk every day. Half an hour on flat terrain is a good start.
- If you have heart failure, it is really worth giving up smoking. Even if you don't succeed the first time, don't become demoralised. The more often you try to stop smoking the better your chances are of succeeding one day. Talk to your doctor about your situation.
- Studies show that patients with heart failure that was caused by alcohol, can recover if they stop drinking alcohol. People, whose heart failure was not caused by alcohol, may drink moderate amounts.

### ▶ MORE INFORMATION

**This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings and sums up the most important points from the Patient Guideline "Heart failure".**

#### **Other useful links**

Patient Guideline "Heart failure"

[www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien](http://www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien)

Self-help organisations and co-operation partners involved in the Patient Guideline

[www.patienten-information.de/patientenbeteiligung/selbsthilfe](http://www.patienten-information.de/patientenbeteiligung/selbsthilfe), [www.azq.de/pf](http://www.azq.de/pf)

#### **Self-help contact**

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: [www.nakos.de](http://www.nakos.de), Tel.: 030 3101 8960

#### **Patient Guidelines**

Patient Guidelines translate the treatment recommendations in medical guidelines into everyday language that can be understood by ordinary people. They provide important background information on the causes, examination methods and treatment of a disease. The BÄK (German Medical Association), the KBV (National Associations of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians) and the AWMF (Association of Scientific Medical Societies) working group are the co-ordinators of the programme for the development of medical guidelines ("National Medical Guidelines") and the respective patient versions.

DOI: 10.6101/AZQ/000085

Responsible for the content:  
German Agency for Quality in Medicine (ÄZQ)  
Joint institution of BÄK and KBV  
Tel.: 030 4005-2500 • Fax: 030 4005-2555  
Email/Ansprechpartner: [mail@patinfo.org](mailto:mail@patinfo.org)  
[www.patinfo.org](http://www.patinfo.org)  
[www.aezq.de](http://www.aezq.de)



With the compliments of