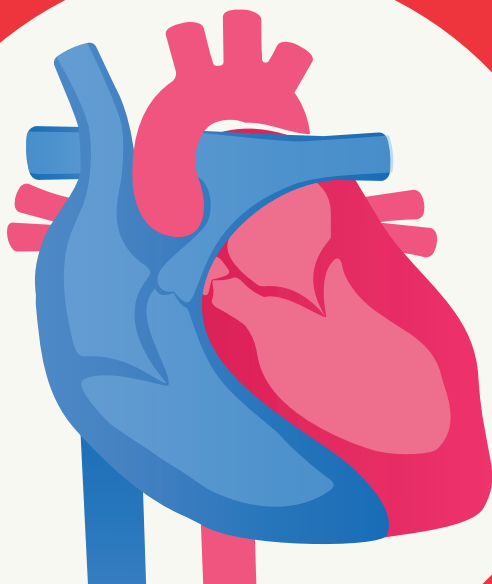


bhf.org.uk



Understanding heart failure



Large print

Symptoms of heart failure

The most common symptoms of heart failure are:

- feeling breathless after activity, while resting or lying down
- feeling tired most of the time, and exhausted when exercising
- swollen feet and ankles which can spread to your legs
- feeling lightheaded, dizzy or fainting.

When to get help

If any of your symptoms are new or getting worse, speak to your doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

If you need help outside normal working hours, call NHS 111.

If your symptoms are very bad, you feel very ill and frightened, phone 999 for an ambulance.

About this booklet

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with heart failure, it can be a worrying time. We have written this booklet to help answer some of your questions about:

- what it all means
- the tests and treatments for heart failure
- how to live with heart failure.

It can feel overwhelming when you're diagnosed and there's a lot of information to take in. Please use this booklet when you're ready, you can keep coming back to it, no need to read it all at once.

This information is an introduction to the topic. If you're living with heart failure our booklet '**Your guide to heart failure**' has more information to help you live well with your condition. Search '**Your guide to heart failure**' at **bhf.org.uk**

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What is heart failure?

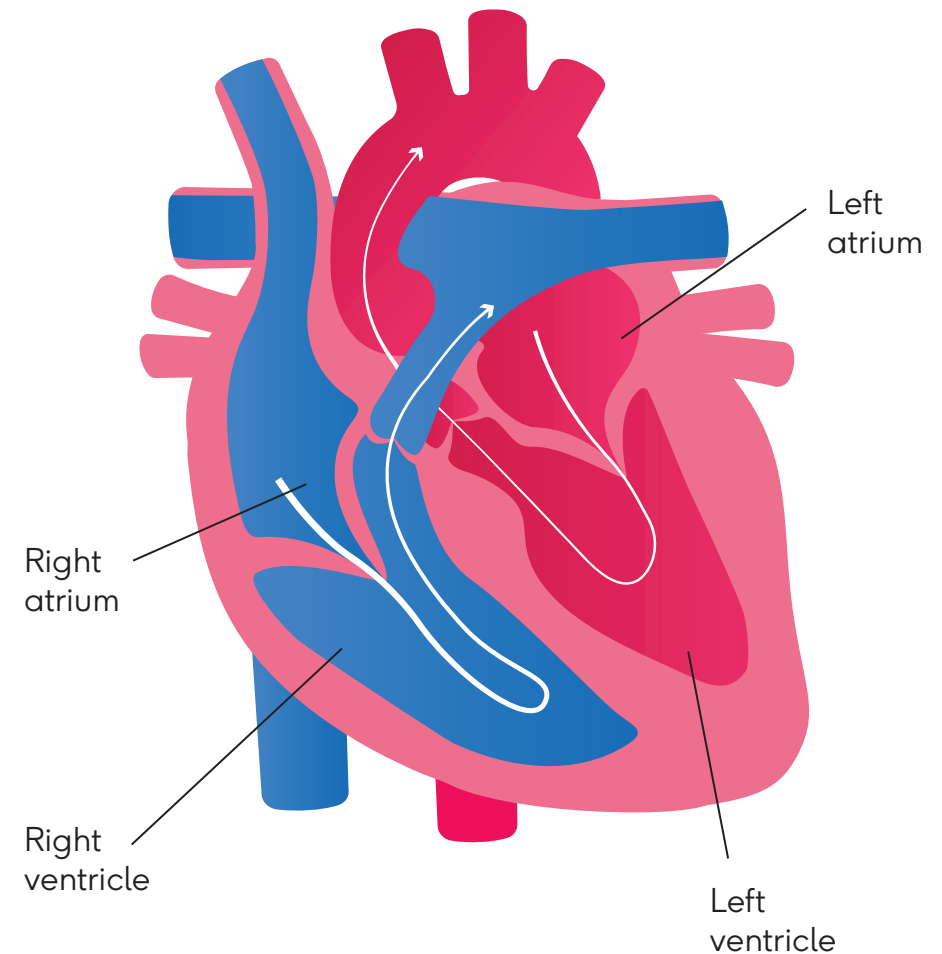
Heart failure is when your heart cannot pump blood around your body as well as it should.

The term heart failure sounds scary, but it does not mean your heart has failed. It just needs more support to help it work better.

Heart failure can affect the left and right side of your heart.

- **Left-side heart failure** is the most common type of heart failure. It means the blood cannot be pumped around your body as well as it should.
- **Right-side heart failure** is when the right side of your heart is not pumping blood to the lungs as well as it should. It can be caused by left-side heart failure.

Your heart and how it works



What is ejection fraction (EF)?

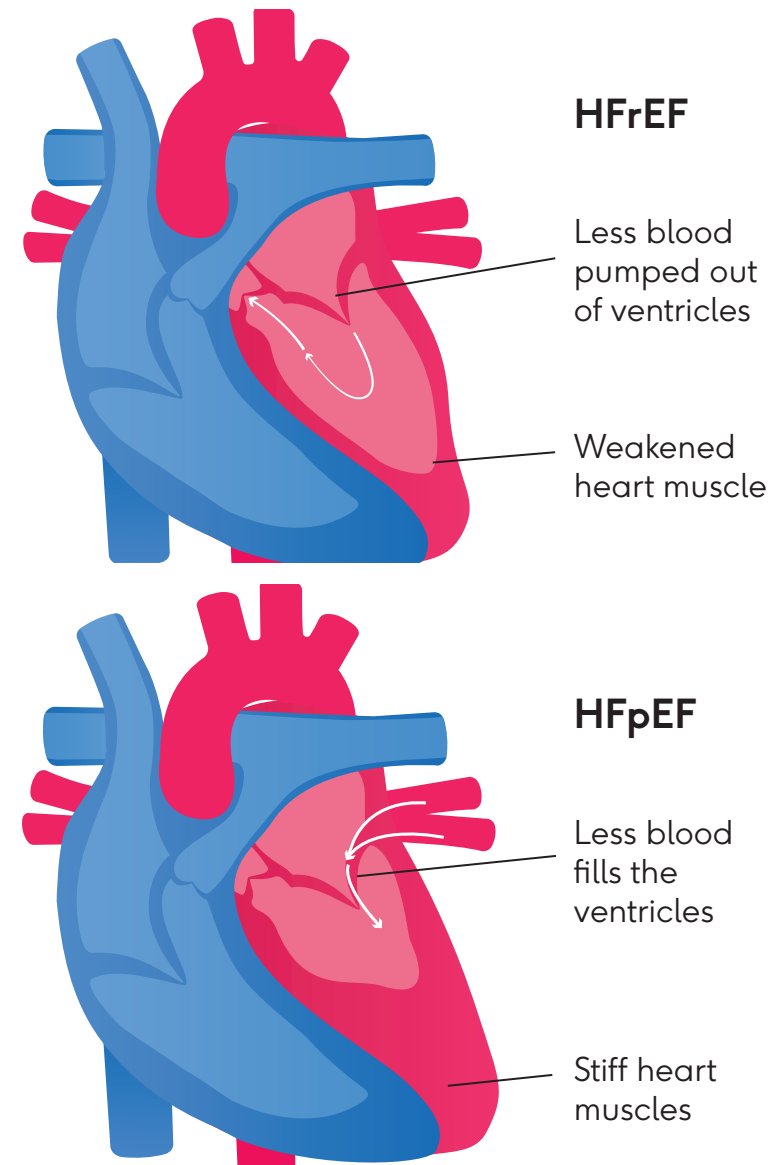
The ejection fraction of your heart means the amount of blood that is pushed out of your heart every time it beats. It's measured as a percentage during an echocardiogram (a test to look at your heart).

There is always some blood left in your heart after each heartbeat. A **normal** ejection fraction is 50% and above.

- Heart failure with **preserved** ejection fraction (HFpEF) means **above 50%**
- Heart failure with **mildly reduced** ejection fraction (HFmrEF) means **40% to 49%**
- Heart failure with **reduced** ejection fraction (HFrEF) means **less than 40%**

If you're not sure what the ejection fraction of your heart is, speak to your doctor.

Watch our short video explaining ejection fraction at bhf.org.uk/heart-failure



What are the stages of heart failure?

There are four stages or classes of heart failure. These stages describe how heart failure can progress.

Stage 1

You have no symptoms during everyday activities.

Stage 2

You feel normal when resting but physical activity causes symptoms.

Stage 3

You feel normal when resting but a small amount of physical activity causes symptoms.

Stage 4

You cannot do any physical activity without symptoms and may feel uncomfortable while resting.

You can find more information on the stages of heart failure in our booklet **'Your guide to heart failure'**.

You can order a free copy at **bhf.org.uk/publications**

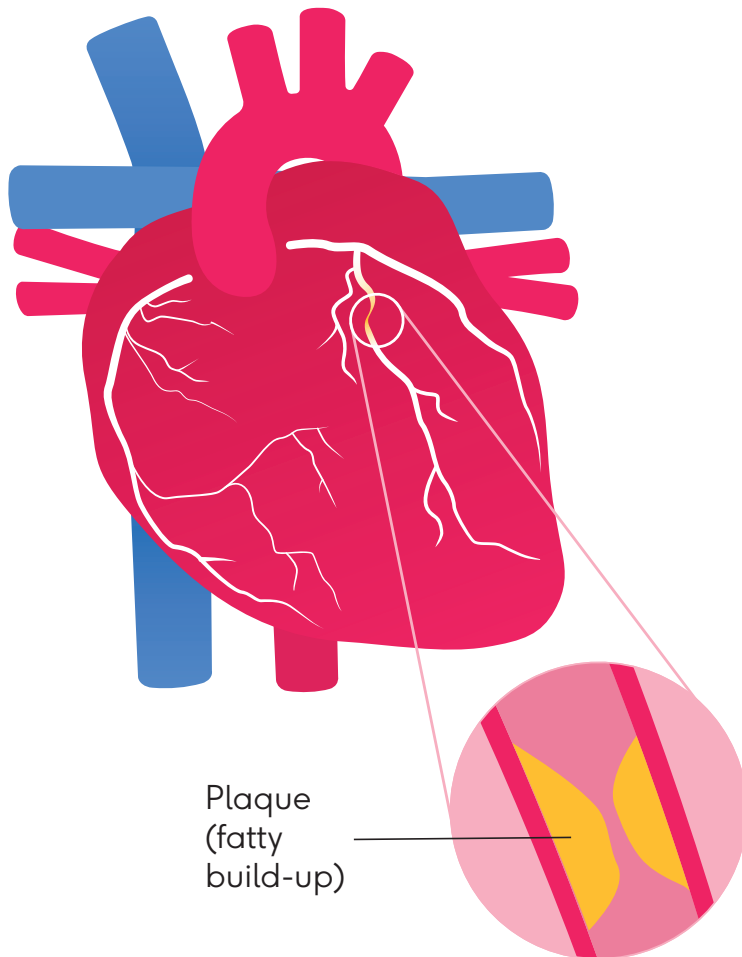
What causes heart failure?

Different conditions can cause heart failure. It can be caused by one or more conditions at the same time.

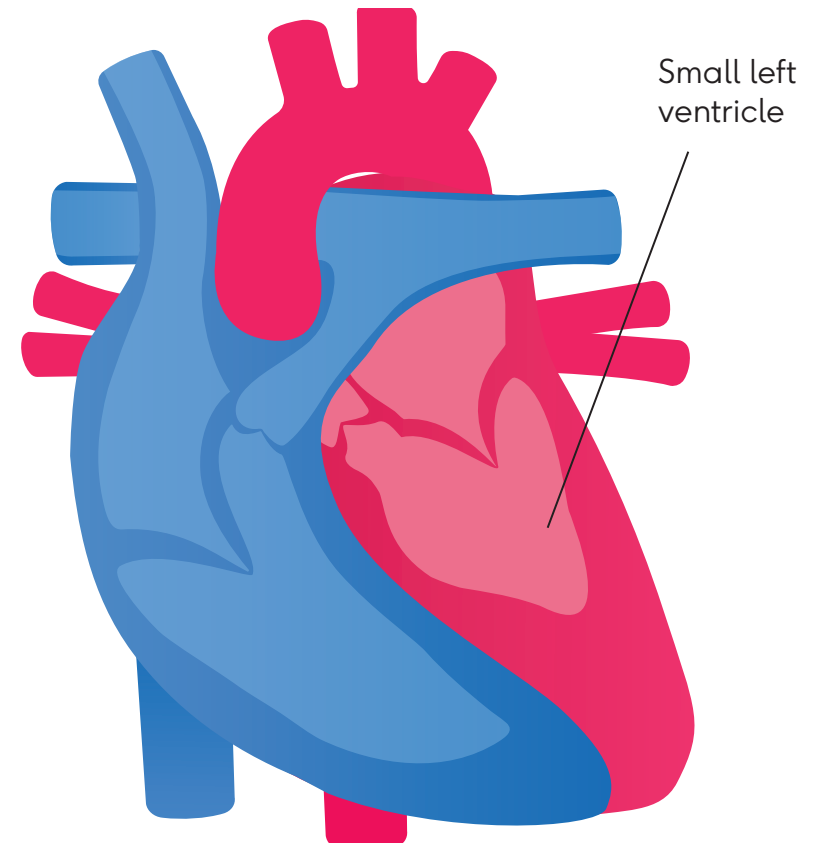
Heart failure can happen suddenly, or it can progress slowly over months or years.

The most common causes of heart failure are:

A heart attack can cause long-term damage to your heart muscle, affecting how well your heart can pump blood.

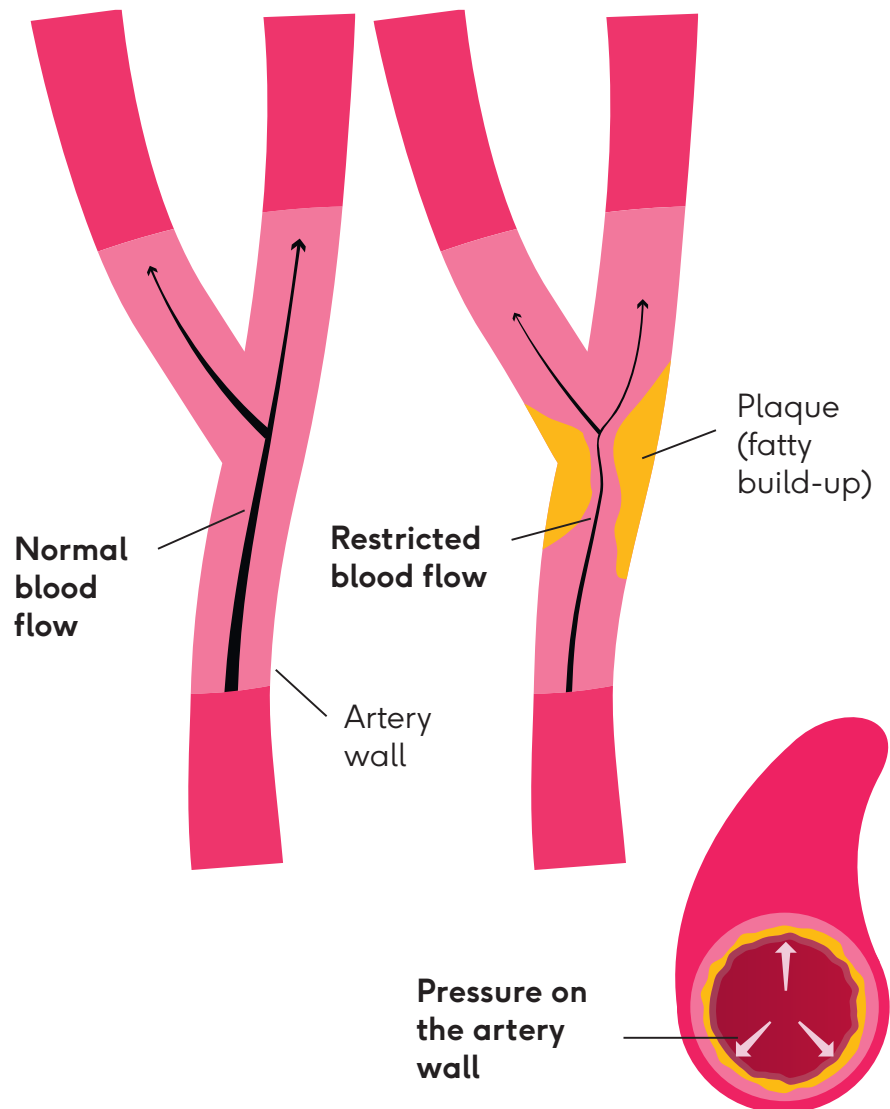


Cardiomyopathy a disease of the heart muscle which affects its size, shape or thickness. Cardiomyopathies can be inherited, caused by other conditions or risk factors, but for some people the cause is not known.



*this is one example of cardiomyopathy.

High blood pressure (hypertension) puts strain on the heart and can lead to heart failure over time.



Other causes of heart failure include:

- Your heart beating too fast, too slow or irregularly (**abnormal heart rhythms**).
- A build-up of abnormal proteins in your heart (**cardiac amyloidosis**).
- Not enough red blood cells carrying oxygen in your blood (**anaemia**).
- A heart condition you're born with (**congenital heart disease**).
- A viral infection affecting the inner lining of your heart (**endocarditis**).
- Blood struggling to flow through the heart (**heart valve disease**).
- High blood pressure in blood vessels that supply your lungs (**pulmonary hypertension**).

- Some cancer treatments, such as **chemotherapy**.
- An underactive or overactive thyroid gland (**thyroid gland disease**).
- Too much **alcohol** (more than the recommended limit of 14 units a week).

When to get help?

If any of your symptoms (page 17) are new or getting worse, speak to your doctor or nurse as soon as possible.

If you need help outside normal working hours, call **NHS 111**.

If the symptoms are very bad, you feel very ill and you're frightened, phone 999 for an ambulance.

What are the symptoms of heart failure?

The most common symptoms of heart failure are:

- feeling breathless after activity, while resting or lying down
- feeling tired most of the time, and exhausted when exercising
- swollen feet and ankles which can spread to your legs
- feeling lightheaded, dizzy or fainting.

Less common symptoms include:

- your heart beating faster than usual (heart palpitations)
- new ongoing cough that does not go away
- feeling confused
- wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- loss of appetite.

Your doctor or nurse can give you information on how to manage your symptoms.

You may also find our booklet '**Your guide to heart failure**' helpful for information on living with heart failure.

You can order a free copy at **[bhf.org.uk/publications](https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications)**

How is heart failure diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and may do some physical checks, such as your blood pressure.

If you have symptoms of heart failure, you may also have:

- blood tests, including a BNP test (see page 20)
- tests on your pee (urinalysis)
- an electrocardiogram (ECG) to measure the electrical activity of your heart
- an echocardiogram (echo) to get a detailed picture of the inside of your heart.

You may also have tests to check if another condition is causing your symptoms, such as a problem with your lungs. Tests include:

- a chest X-ray
- breathing tests.

You will need to be referred to a specialist for some of these tests. You can find more information on these tests on our website: **[bhf.org.uk/tests](https://www.bhf.org.uk/tests)**

What is a BNP test?

After diagnosis, you'll have regular blood tests to check how well your heart is pumping. This test is usually called a BNP test.

If your heart is not pumping properly, it will produce more of the protein, brain natriuretic peptide (BNP). This means your BNP levels will be higher.

Your doctors may also use blood tests to keep an eye on your kidneys, which can be affected by heart failure.

What if I have to wait for a referral appointment?

It can take weeks or months to get a hospital appointment. You may also have to wait to get your test results.

There is no right or wrong way to feel during this time, everyone is different.

Continuing with everyday activities or spending time with loved ones and pets can be a welcome distraction. You may find it helpful to talk with your partner, family or a close friend.

Can heart failure be cured?

Heart failure cannot be cured. But with the right medicine, treatment and lifestyle changes, most people can live a full life. It's important to remember that everyone is different, and their experience with heart failure will be different.

This can be scary, and you might feel worried about your future. Speak to your doctor or nurse specialist for information on how to manage your condition.

If you need support during this time, or someone to talk to, speak to one of our nurses.



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)
or email hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk
Our helpline is open weekdays,
9am to 5pm (excluding
bank holidays).

How long will I live?

The term heart failure can sound scary, but it does not mean your heart has failed. It just needs more support to help it work better.

Heart failure is usually a long-term condition. It's not possible to tell anyone with heart failure how long they'll live for. But by managing your condition it's possible to live well with heart failure.

Your doctor and nurse specialist can give you more information on treatment options, medicines and lifestyle changes to help you live as well as possible.

How do I come to terms with my diagnosis?

Many people have good days and bad days following a diagnosis. It's normal to feel anxious, sad and scared about the future.

If these feelings continue and are affecting your quality of life, talk to your GP.

You can also refer yourself to the NHS for talking therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and counselling. Search '**NHS talking therapies**'.

Your GP may have access to a social prescriber, someone who can help you find local services and support your practical, social and emotional wellbeing.

You can also get in touch with Mind, a charity offering support to anyone affected by a mental health problem at **mind.org.uk**

Use the Hub of Hope to find support services near you. Search **hubofhope.co.uk**

At first you can feel overwhelmed by information, it's important to know where you can go to ask questions and get support.

Getting support

British Heart Foundation can help you and your family find information on tests, treatments and living with heart failure.

Being diagnosed with heart failure can also affect your loved ones. Our support services can also help them understand your condition, find answers and support you to live well.

Call the Heart Helpline

If you or your family are affected by a heart or circulatory condition, our cardiac nurses can help you with your questions or concerns.

Call **0808 802 1234** (freephone) or email **hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk** Our helpline is open weekdays, 9am to 5pm (excluding bank holidays).

You can also speak to our nurses using the live chat feature. Find out more at **bhf.org.uk/helpline**

Join our online community

It can help to speak to other people going through a similar experience. Many people find joining heart failure Facebook groups helpful, or you could join our online community, HealthUnlocked. **bhf.org.uk/ouronlinecommunity**

Join Heart Matters

Discover the benefits of Heart Matters, your free heart-health membership. Join to receive our free magazine or email newsletter, featuring expert tips, heart-healthy recipes, inspiring stories, and the latest updates backed by BHF-funded science.

Guided by our team of experts, Heart Matters helps you to make small changes for a healthier heart. **bhf.org.uk/heartmatters**

Listen to The Ticker Tapes podcasts

Listen to real stories of people whose lives have been changed by heart and circulatory conditions. There are also special episodes with our researchers, professors, and celebrity ambassadors. **bhf.org.uk/podcasts**

What's the treatment for heart failure?

Treatment can help manage your symptoms and improve your quality of life. You may have more than one treatment for heart failure.

Treatments include:



medicine



a medical
device



surgery

Your doctor will discuss treatment options with you. You can ask them questions about the different options, and what it means for you.

Medicine

Medicines can protect and improve your heart function, improve your symptoms and reduce fluid building up in your body. You will usually take more than one.

You can find more information on medicines for heart failure in our booklet '**Your guide to heart failure**'.

You can order a free copy at
[bhf.org.uk/publications](https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications)

These are some of the common medicines you may be given for heart failure:

ACE inhibitors

ACE inhibitors help your blood vessels widen and relax. This lowers your blood pressure, reducing the workload of your heart and improving blood flow to your heart muscle.

Common ACE inhibitors:

- ramipril
- captopril
- enalapril
- lisinopril
- perindopril.

Beta blockers

Beta blockers help slow your heart rate, reducing the work your heart has to do.

Common beta blockers:

- atenolol
- bisoprolol
- carvedilol
- nebivolol.

Sacubitril valsartan (Entresto)

Sacubitril valsartan helps your blood vessels widen and relax. This lowers your blood pressure, reducing the workload of your heart and improving blood flow to your heart muscle.

You may be prescribed sacubitril valsartan if:

- you still have symptoms after having other medicines
- your heart is not pumping enough blood high in oxygen around your body.

Water tablets (diuretics)

Water tablets stop your body from holding onto too much water. They help your kidneys to get rid of water in your pee.

This means the heart does not have to work as hard to pump blood around your body. They can also help relieve symptoms such as swelling and breathlessness.

Common water tablets:

- amiloride
- bendroflumethiazide (bendrofluazide)
- bumetanide
- furosemide (frusemide)
- metolazone.

If you have questions about a medicine you're taking, speak to your doctor, nurse specialist or a pharmacist.

What is titration?

You might hear your doctor say they're going to titrate your medicine. This means they're going to change the amount (dose) of medicine you need to take.

What can I do about side effects?

Everyone reacts differently to medicines. Most people have no side effects, but everyone is different.

Side effects can be caused by your medicine but could also be caused by other things such as your condition, stress, tiredness, or a change in your lifestyle.

It's worth bearing in mind that symptoms with any medicine may improve over time or even disappear.

If you're struggling with the side effects of your medicine, it's important not to stop taking it before speaking to a healthcare professional.

Speak to your doctor, nurse specialist or pharmacist. They can:

- find out if your medicine is causing the side effects
- help you manage side effects
- change the dose of your medicine if appropriate
- prescribe a different type of medicine
- recommend an alternative treatment.



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Medical devices

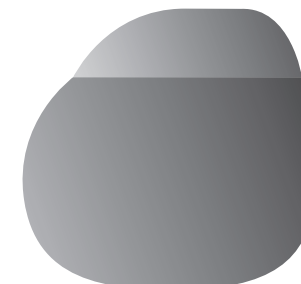
The most common devices used to treat heart failure include:

- pacemakers
- implantable cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs)
- cardiac resynchronisation therapy (CRT) devices.

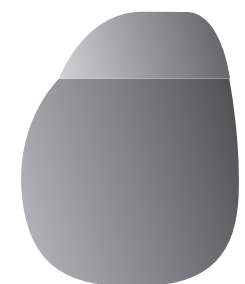
If you're at risk of a dangerous, abnormal heart rhythm (arrhythmia) you're more likely to have an ICD or CRT-D (a type of CRT).



Pacemaker



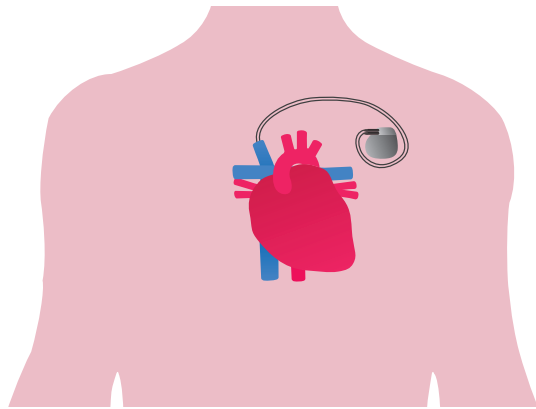
CRT



ICD

Pacemaker

A pacemaker is a small device that's usually put under your skin below your collarbone. It helps to improve the strength, rate and rhythm of your heartbeat. This can help your heart to pump better.



Implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD)

An ICD is a small device that's put under the skin below your collarbone. It checks your heart rhythm. If it notices a dangerous heart rhythm it can give your heart an electrical shock to treat it.

An ICD can also work as a pacemaker if you need one, so you'll only have one device.

Cardiac resynchronisation therapy (CRT) devices

A CRT is a special type of pacemaker that's usually put under your skin below your collarbone.

It's used when the pumping chambers of your heart beat out of time with each other. A CRT helps the chambers to pump at the same time and helps your heart pump better.

This device can be combined with other devices to help your heart, such as:

- cardiac resynchronisation therapy device and defibrillation (CRT-D)
- cardiac resynchronisation therapy device and pacemaker (CRT-P).

Surgery

Heart surgery can:

- improve blood flow to your heart
- repair or replace a faulty valve.

The types of heart surgery you may have include:

- heart valve surgery
- coronary angioplasty or bypass surgery
- heart transplant surgery.

For more information about the types of surgery you may have, read our booklet **'Your guide to heart failure'**.

Finding out you need surgery can feel scary. You may find it helpful if you know what to expect, find more information about surgery on our website: **bhf.org.uk/treatments**

Surgery is not always possible for people with heart failure. Your doctor will explain the best treatment option for you and why.

What else can I do to manage my condition?

As well as following recommendations from your doctor and taking medicine, you can help manage your condition by:



watching the amount of fluid you have each day (if your doctor tells you to)



making lifestyle changes



getting vaccinated to protect you from getting ill

Fluids and weighing yourself regularly

Your body may hold on to fluid more than usual because your heart cannot pump blood around your body as well as it should. Your veins do not have enough pressure to help blood flow back up to your heart and lungs.

This can lead to fluid building up, usually in your legs and feet, but sometimes in your stomach or lower back. This causes swelling (oedema).

You may need to reduce the amount of fluid in your body. Your doctor may recommend watching how much fluid you have, including:

- soft drinks
- alcohol
- tea and coffee
- soup.

Some medicines and implanted devices used to treat heart failure can help stop fluid building up in your body. They improve the heart muscle's strength, helping to keep your blood circulating properly.

It's also a good idea to weigh yourself every day. A sudden increase in weight could mean your body is holding on to fluid. Weigh yourself at the same time every day, it's usually best to do this when you wake up in the morning.

If you notice your weight has gone up more than 2kg in three days, you have swelling in your feet or ankles, or feel breathless contact your doctor.

Salt

It's also important to watch how much salt you have. Too much salt can make your body hold on to water and affect how your water tablets work (see page 32).

Adults should eat less than 6 g of salt each day. That's about one level teaspoon.

It's also important to avoid salt substitutes. Some salt substitutes can be very high in potassium and are not recommended if you have heart failure.

Download or order our '**Eat better**' booklet for tips on having less salt and easy swaps you can make.

Making lifestyle changes

You can also make lifestyle changes to improve your health, including:



keeping active
(see page 49)



maintaining a
healthy weight



eating a
healthy diet



stopping
smoking



reducing the amount of
alcohol you drink (less than
14 units per week)

Living a healthier lifestyle can be hard at first, but it's important for your overall quality of life.

Sign up to Heart Matters for heart-healthy food swaps, exercise tips and lifestyle support. Find out more at **bhf.org.uk/heartmatters**

You can also order our booklet '**Your guide to heart failure**' for more information on living with heart failure, including diet, weight and exercise.

You can order a free copy at **bhf.org.uk/publications**

Getting vaccinated

Everyone with heart failure should be offered a free yearly flu vaccine, and a one-off pneumococcal vaccine.

A pneumococcal vaccine helps protect you against illnesses like pneumonia and meningitis.

You can get these vaccinations at your GP surgery or a local pharmacy that offers a vaccination service.

How can I make the most of my appointments?

It's normal to feel overwhelmed during your appointments, and you may leave with unanswered questions.

It can help to prepare for your appointments to get the most of your time with your doctor or nurse specialist.

These tips can help you get the most out of your appointments:

- Write down any questions you have and prioritise them by importance.
- Ask if you can email any questions you did not get a chance to ask.
- Take a notepad and pen with you so you can take notes.
- Take someone with you who can help take notes or be a support.

Have a think about the questions you want to ask, it could be about your diagnosis, treatment, side effects or living with heart failure. Do not be afraid to ask difficult or embarrassing questions, healthcare professionals are there to support you.

It can also be helpful to ask when your next appointment will be, and where you can go for help and support in the meantime.

For more questions you may want to ask, visit **[bhf.org.uk/appointmentquestions](https://www.bhf.org.uk/appointmentquestions)**

What can I do to help manage tiredness (fatigue)?

Heart failure can make you feel more tired than usual, this is a side effect of your condition and can also be caused by medicine you're taking.

It's important to ask your nurse specialist or doctor for help if fatigue is affecting your daily life. They can check why you're tired and rule out other causes.

Here are some tips which may help:



Pace yourself, if you have a busy day coming up, make sure you have a rest day before or after.



Balance your day with time for activities and rest, break your day up so you have time to rest.



Plan social activities around your energy levels, meet friends and family at places where you can sit and socialise, for example at a café.



Eat regularly, if you're struggling with your usual diet, try smaller meals more often to give you energy.

If you're supporting someone with heart failure it can be difficult to know how you can help. Helping with daily tasks can be a way to support someone struggling with fatigue. You could:

- prepare meals
- take children to school or pick them up
- help with food shopping
- drive them to appointments.

Can I exercise with heart failure?

Exercise can help with symptoms of heart failure and can improve your overall wellbeing. It can also:

- boost your mood
- increase your energy levels
- help you sleep better.

The thought of exercising with heart failure may seem overwhelming, and you might not know where to start.

It's important to speak to your doctor or nurse specialist about what exercise is right for you. Ask them if there's a local exercise rehab or support available.

You can also ask your GP if you can access a social prescriber. They can help you find local support services, such as healthy lifestyle, exercise and support groups.

Pumping Marvellous have a Heart Failure Guide with information on rehabilitation and exercise for people with heart failure. Find out more at **pumpingmarvellous.org**

You can also find tips on exercise when you have heart failure on our website **bhf.org.uk/activity**

Can I have sex?

You and your partner may feel nervous about having sex and worry that it could be harmful. Most people diagnosed with heart failure can enjoy a healthy sex life if their symptoms are well managed.

If you've had surgery you'll need to wait until you're recovered and feel well enough.

Find a position that works for you and does not put too much strain on your wound. If it's healing well, you could try putting a small, smooth cushion against your wound between you and your partner.

Like any other exercise you do, if you feel well and listen to your body, you should be ok.

You should be fine to have sex if you can walk a mile on flat ground in 20 minutes, or climb two flights of stairs comfortably.

It may feel embarrassing or uncomfortable to ask questions, but healthcare professionals speak to people all the time about sex and relationships. They will be understanding and can offer you information and support. Many people feel much better once they speak to someone.

You can also visit **bhf.org.uk/sex**

Can I go on holiday?

Most people with heart failure can go on holiday.

If your heart failure is controlled and you feel well, it should be ok. Check with your doctor that you are fit enough to travel.

You'll need to bring enough medicine with you to last your holiday.

It's also a good idea to:

- Pack your medicine in your hand luggage and keep spare in your suitcase.
- Keep a list of your medicine and doses in your bag in case you lose any.
- Plan activities around your ability and fitness, avoid anything that may be too strenuous for you and plan rest days.
- Avoid travelling to places that have high altitude, above 2,000 metres.

- Know the emergency numbers of the country you're travelling to and your travel insurance provider.
- Check if you can get airport assistance before you travel.
- Look up where your closest pharmacy and hospital are, in case you need them.

It's important to let your travel insurance provider know if you're diagnosed with heart failure.

You can find more information on holidays and travel insurance at **[bhf.org.uk/practicalsupport](https://www.bhf.org.uk/practicalsupport)**

Will I need to take time off work?

Everyone is different. Some people continue to work, sometimes with reduced hours, and others give up work temporarily or permanently.

It's important to decide what the right decision is for you and your health, and what options are available.

You can speak to your doctor about your diagnosis and treatment and how this may affect your daily life.

It can also be helpful to speak to your employer. UK law requires most employers to make reasonable adjustments, so you can continue working despite the changes to your health.

Reasonable adjustments could be:

- changing your hours or start and finish times
- working shorter days
- time off for appointments
- having less time on your feet
- working from home more often.

If you need to take time off work, or give up your current job, there is support available.

The charity Turn2us provides practical help to people who may be worried about finances. They can give you information about benefits you may be entitled to.

Citizen's Advice can also give you free, confidential benefits advice.

You can find out more at **citizensadvice.org.uk**

Can I drive?

You'll need to tell the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) if you're diagnosed with heart failure and have symptoms that:

- affect your ability to drive safely
- distract you when driving
- happen when you're resting.

If you drive a bus, coach or lorry then you will need to tell the DVLA about your condition.

Let the DVLA know if you have a pacemaker or implanted device. You'll also need to let them know if your device gives you a shock (fires). This may feel like a sudden, hard thump to your chest or back.

If you're told you cannot drive because of your health you may be able to get a free bus pass. Sometimes this will also give you discount on some train fares. Search '**free bus pass**' and the country you're in for more information on your government website.

Speak to your doctor if you're worried about driving.

You can also find more information on our website **bhf.org.uk/driving**

You can find more information on living with heart failure in our booklet '**Your guide to heart failure**'.

How can I make sure I'm prepared in case something happens to me?

Although many people live well with heart failure, you may want to make sure your loved ones are prepared for the future and taken care of.

Conversations about life expectancy and death are difficult. You may need to discuss your care, finances and wills. Sorting these things out when you feel well enough to do so can help give you and your loved ones peace of mind.

Our booklet '**Your guide to heart failure**' can give you more information to help you prepare for the future.

You can also call or email our cardiac nurses if you're not sure where to go for support (see page 59).

Support for you and your loved ones

British Heart Foundation

If you need more information or just want to talk to someone, we're here for you.

- Talk to one of our cardiac nurses by calling our freephone Heart Helpline.
- Join our online community, Health Unlocked, to talk to other people living with heart failure.
- Subscribe to Heart Matters for information on diet, exercise and more.

bhf.org.uk/supportforyou



Call 0808 802 1234 (freephone)
or email hearthelpline@bhf.org.uk
Our helpline is open weekdays,
9am to 5pm (excluding
bank holidays).

Cardiomyopathy UK

Information and support for people affected by cardiomyopathy, including information on living well with heart failure.

cardiomyopathy.org

Pumping Marvellous

A charity for people affected by heart failure, including their heart failure guide and community hub to help people to live well with heart failure.

pumpingmarvellous.org

Heart Failure Matters

A charity providing practical information for people diagnosed with heart failure, families and carers.

heartfailurematters.org

NHS

Trusted information on diagnosis, treatment and living with heart failure.

nhs.uk/conditions/heart-failure

Our heart failure research

Our research has created treatments to give people with heart failure longer, healthier lives.

But there's currently no cure other than a heart transplant. We're working to change that.

To find out more about our heart failure research visit
bhf.org.uk/heartfailureresearch

For more information from BHF on heart failure, scan here or visit
bhf.org.uk/heartfailure



We are British Heart Foundation



Through research, information and support we're here for everyone affected by heart and circulatory conditions.

Get help

Speak to one of our experienced cardiac nurses for more information and support. They can help answer your questions, big or small.

You can call **0808 802 1234** (freephone).
Our helpline is open weekdays, 9am to 5pm
(excluding bank holidays).

Support our work

If you've found this information helpful and would like to support our work, please scan the QR code or visit bhf.org.uk/support-us



Scan here with
the camera
on your phone

Last updated August 2024. HIS8LP/0425

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and the Isle of Man (1295).

This booklet has been supported by Royal Mail
in partnership with British Heart Foundation.

