

## HEALTHY LIVING WITH HEART FAILURE

Your heart is a busy organ. It's about the size of your fist and beats 100,000 times a day. The heart's job is to supply all your other organs with blood so they can function properly and keep you healthy, active and alive.

Congestive heart failure (CHF) does not mean that the heart stops working (or is congested) -- it simply means that the heart can no longer circulate blood properly throughout the body. Heart failure can affect either the left, right or both sides of the heart.

An estimated 5 million people of all ages (including younger adults and children) have been diagnosed and treated for heart failure although the disease occurs most often in older people. It is the leading cause of hospitalization in people 65 and older.

### CAUSES & RISK FACTORS

Congestive heart failure occurs when the heart muscle can no longer pump enough blood to supply the body with oxygen and nutrients. As a result blood circulates more slowly and pressure within the heart increases. Over time poor blood circulation damages the kidneys, lungs, gastrointestinal tract and other organs.

If an older family member has been diagnosed with any of the diseases listed below he or she should have regular heart checkups to detect and treat possible heart failure:

- High blood pressure, coronary artery disease, irregular heartbeats, damaged or defective heart valves.
- Thyroid disease.
- Diabetes -- especially if blood sugar levels are poorly controlled.
- Sleep apnea -- the inability to breathe properly at night -- decreases blood oxygen levels.
- Excessive alcohol.
- Kidney conditions that increase blood pressure and fluid retention.

### SYMPTOMS

Signs of congestive heart failure include:

- Shortness of breath
- Coughing
- Swelling of feet, ankles or abdomen
- Weight gain
- Rapid pulse; heart palpitations
- Sleep disorders
- Fatigue, weakness, faintness
- Loss of appetite, indigestion

These symptoms may also be signs of other diseases. If an older relative experiences any of these symptoms, caregivers should encourage him or her to schedule a complete physical exam to find out what is causing them

## **DIAGNOSING HEART FAILURE**

If your parent's physician suspects that he or she may have signs of heart failure he or will refer him to a heart specialist for a variety of diagnostic tests and evaluation of his heart health including:

- Assessment of kidney and thyroid function
- Chest x-rays to measure heart and lung function
- Electrocardiogram to identify any heart damage caused by a previous heart attack
- Echocardiogram, ejection fraction, cardiac catheterization and stress tests to determine the heart's ability to pump blood
- Angiogram to identify blocked arteries

## **TREATING HEART FAILURE**

Like many chronic illnesses heart failure cannot be cured. However the symptoms can be managed successfully and a variety of treatments are available that will help your parent stay comfortable, healthy and active. These include a variety of medications, pacemakers, implantable defibrillators and other devices that help the heart function normally and prevent additional damage. Frequently prescribed medications include:

- Drugs that reduce blood pressure and increase the amount of blood pumped by the heart
- Anticoagulants for people with a history of blood clots or have a history of stroke
- Diuretics ("water pills") to increase urination and prevent fluid buildup in the body.

If medications and lifestyle changes do not manage CHF symptoms effectively, your parent's doctor may suggest recommend surgery to improve heart function.

## **LIVING WELL WITH A FAILING HEART**

Besides medical treatments lifestyle changes can also improve your relative's overall health— and yours too!

- Stop smoking. Smoking damages blood vessels especially in the heart. Find a "stop smoking" program to help your parent quit and discuss the importance of giving up tobacco.
- Salt increases water retention which can make heart failure symptoms worse. Replace the salt shaker with herbs, spices and salt substitutes. Check the sodium content of canned, frozen and packaged foods.
- Check weight regularly – even if your family member does not have a weight problem. An increase in weight may be a sign of fluid buildup caused by heart failure.
- Enlist the help of a dietitian to develop a healthy eating and weight management plan for your parent.
- Add moderate exercise to your parent's daily routine. Get the doctor's okay before he or she starts to work out. Hospital wellness centers often sponsor fitness programs for older adults.
- Learn to relax and take it easy. Stress has a negative effect on the heart.
- Check with the doctor or pharmacist before your parent uses over-the-counter medications, vitamins, supplements or medications prescribed by other doctors. They may interact with other medicines your parent takes or cause side effects.

## **FACING UP TO HEART FAILURE**

Living well with heart failure is a challenge for your older relative and for you as a care provider. Over time and with the help of your parent's doctor you both will learn how to manage this difficult disease and devise strategies for managing symptoms. Some days will be good days...others not so good. Make it a point to enjoy the good ones together! [826/5/10]