



**KAISER PERMANENTE®**

## Congestive Heart Failure

Congestive heart failure is a condition when your heart is weak and cannot pump as much blood as it should. This weakness causes the blood that is returning to the heart to back up in the veins. As a result, the body starts to retain fluid, especially in the lungs, legs, and ankles. This retention of fluids, in turn, usually causes symptoms, including swelling, a sudden weight gain, and shortness of breath.

Swelling usually occurs in the legs and ankles, and sometimes the abdomen. Ankle swelling will usually occur late in the day (the excess fluid moving towards the legs because they are, typically, lower than other body parts). You may also have a sudden weight gain of one to three pounds over a day or two.

In addition to the swelling and weight gain, you may become tired and short of breath while performing a simple task, such as dressing or making your bed. You may also experience shortness of breath when you lie flat, so you might want to sleep propped-up on two or three pillows, or better yet, on a foam wedge.

Congestive heart failure can be caused by many things. It can be caused by having had a heart attack, which weakens the heart muscle causing it to become thick and stiff and incapable of responding as efficiently as it did before. It can also be caused by long-term high blood pressure, or by coronary atherosclerosis (a gradual narrowing of the arteries in the heart due to a buildup of fatty plaque). Other causes include alcohol abuse or having a preexisting defect since birth. And there are times when the cause is simply not clear.

You may be able to lower your risk of congestive heart failure by not smoking, by following a low-fat, low-cholesterol, and low-sodium diet, and by maintaining a regular exercise program.

Once you've been diagnosed with congestive heart failure, it's especially important to take the following steps:

- 1.) If you smoke, quit. Smoking decreases the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the heart, so it can't pump as efficiently.
- 2.) You should avoid salt and high-sodium foods, such as bacon, salami, cheese, and hot dogs. Salt causes your body to retain fluid, which can place strain on your heart. When shopping for food, read product labels carefully to discover sodium content. If you don't have kidney problems, you can use a salt substitute.
- 3.) You should develop a moderate exercise plan with the help of your health care professional. And you'll need to pace your daily activities so you don't get fatigued.

Whenever you experience any of the symptoms of congestive heart failure, you should consult your health care professional as soon as possible. Your health care professional will examine you and may order certain tests, including an EKG and a chest X-ray. You may be prescribed medications that help eliminate excess water and sodium from the body or help the heart to pump stronger.

Congestive heart failure usually responds well to treatment. If you follow your treatment plan—including making the recommended lifestyle changes—you should be able to live a comfortable and productive life.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at [www.kaiserpermanente.org/california](http://www.kaiserpermanente.org/california), then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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REGIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION