Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What caused my heart failure?
- How severe is my heart failure?
- What is the stage and level of my heart failure?
- What is my ejection fraction?
- What might happen if I don't do anything about my heart failure?
- What changes should I make to diet and exercise routines?
- Are there medications I can take to help me feel better?
- What treatment options are available for me with the risks and benefits of each option?
- How can I monitor my heart failure?
- Can I monitor at home?
What is Heart Failure?

Today, about 6.2 million people in the U.S. have heart failure, and that number is expected to increase rapidly. The good news is that more people are surviving heart attacks, but that is also a factor increasing the rate of heart failure, along with increasing rates of diabetes and obesity.

A diagnosis of heart failure can be scary for patients and their loved ones. When most people learn that they have heart failure, they are afraid that their heart is going to suddenly quit working. While a diagnosis of heart failure does mean that your heart is not pumping well, if treated, many patients can live enjoyable lives.

Heart failure is when the heart muscle either weakens and its ability to pump is reduced or when the heart muscle stiffens and cannot relax enough to fill with blood, or both. In either case, the heart is unable to get enough blood to the body.

How is Heart Failure Measured?

Heart failure is measured in stages from A to D and with a functional classification system from Class I (mild) to Class 4 (severe). Patients can move up and down in their functional class, depending on the symptoms that they are experiencing. Stages refer to structural changes in the heart and progress from stage A, high risk of developing heart failure, to stage D, advanced heart failure.

Who Is at Risk?

Some of the most common risk factors for heart failure are:
- Heart attack
- Valve disease
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Enlarged heart or cardiomyopathy

Types of Heart Failure

To understand the types of heart failure, it is important to understand ejection fraction. Ejection fraction is the percentage of blood that is pumped out with each heartbeat. The heart never empties all the blood from the lower chambers (ventricles), so a normal ejection fraction at rest is between 55% and 70%. People can often improve their ejection fraction with a healthy diet, exercise and, if needed, medical treatment.

HFpEF

HFpEF, or heart failure with preserved ejection fraction, is when the heart muscle has become stiff and cannot relax enough to fully fill the ventricle. In this type of heart failure, the ejection fraction may still be in the normal range, or above 50%.

HFpEF

HFpEF, or heart failure with preserved ejection fraction, is when the heart muscle has gotten weak and cannot pump enough blood to the body. In this type of heart failure, the ejection fraction is lower than normal, often under 40%.

Signs & Symptoms

Some people with heart failure do not have any symptoms. Some of the more common symptoms of heart failure are:
- Shortness of breath, especially with exercise or when lying down
- Swelling in your legs, ankles and feet
- Weight gain of 3 pounds overnight or 5 pounds in a week
- Feeling very tired or weak
- A cough that will not go away
- Being unable to exercise or do normal activities like walking up stairs
- Increased heart rate
- Lack of appetite or nausea

Treatment

While there is currently no cure for heart failure, patients may be able to reduce symptoms with medication(s), devices, exercise, reducing sodium, dietary changes and fluid restrictions. Also, there are now devices to help patients monitor heart failure at home. Medications commonly used to treat heart failure include ACE Inhibitors, beta blockers, ARBs and Diuretics.

In some cases, the heart rhythm is disrupted, and a pacemaker or an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) may be implanted.

Sometimes the heart becomes too weak to pump and a left ventricular assist device (LVAD) will be implanted. This mechanical pump may be used while waiting on a heart transplant or as a device that is left in place as treatment.