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Myths and Realities about Heart Failure

Dear Reader!

Heart failure is nothing but the medical term for a less efficient heart or a poorly pumping heart. It is a growing medical concern globally mainly because acute cardiac care has advanced tremendously in the recent past but long-term cardiovascular risk management and preventative services are lagging behind. As a result of this, more and more individuals are saved from heart attacks and cardiac arrests but have a poor quality of life due to heart failure.

It is estimated that about 10 million (1 crore) people are currently living with heart failure in India. However, this number is likely to be an underestimation of the total number of affected people in the country due to the lack of adequate disease surveillance systems.

One of the common misconceptions or myths among people with heart failure is that they should restrict their activities and not engage in any form of exercise. Contrary to this belief, recent guidelines outline that stable heart failure patients should undergo exercise based cardiac rehabilitation as part of their medical management. This simply means that as soon as the symptoms of heart failure like breathlessness and swelling of feet are medically controlled, the individual should be encouraged to be active and should also involve in appropriate exercises as advised by the cardiac rehab team in order to improve the heart's pumping capacity and overall wellbeing.

In this edition of Heart 'e' Health, Team Cardiac Wellness Institute aims to increase awareness about heart failure and its causes, symptoms, management modalities and outcomes.

Coronavirus Advisory for individuals with heart failure and other heart diseases

As you may be aware, Coronavirus is a viral infection which spreads by contact with infected individuals and/or contact with droplets of saliva or body fluids of infected people. Individuals with known medical conditions like diabetes, hypertension, heart failure, lung disease and in general the very young and the old members of the community may be severely affected by this virus.

Some important precautions to be taken if you have heart failure and other heart diseases are:

- Avoid crowded places; avoid travelling if possible
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds before touching food, handling medications and caring for sick people
- Do not share towels; each family member should have a separate towel
- Eat a balanced healthy diet, get enough sleep and be regular with your exercise
- Contact your healthcare provider if you have any symptoms like fever, cough and fatigue

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Heart Failure - Causes, Signs & Symptoms



What is Heart Failure and how do you diagnose it?

Heart failure means that the heart is not pumping as well as it should be. It is a chronic, progressive condition in which the heart muscle is unable to pump enough blood to meet the body's needs for blood and oxygen. Basically, the heart can't keep up with its workload.

The diagnosis is usually made by a thorough clinical examination followed by a few investigations like X-Ray Chest, Electrocardiogram (ECG) and Echocardiogram (Echo). Of these, the echo is the most important investigation to diagnose and treat patients with heart failure.

If you have these complaints, it may be due to heart failure!

- Breathlessness on exertion
- Excessive tiredness and weakness
- Frequent bouts cough and cold
- Night-time cough and sleeplessness
- Rapid weight gain within a few days
- Chest pain, chest discomfort or palpitations





Who is likely to be affected by heart failure?

Heart failure mostly occurs in individuals who have a history of:

- Heart attack, bypass surgery, angioplasty
- Poorly controlled or long duration of hypertension
- Abnormally functioning valves
- Cardiomyopathy (weakness of cardiac muscles)
- Congenital heart disease (heart diseases present from birth)
- Smoking, alcoholism and use of recreational drugs

Myth - Heart failure is the same as heart attack

Fact - Heart attack is different from heart failure. Heart attack occurs when the blood supply to the heart is impeded due to one or more blocks in the coronary blood supply. Heart attack can lead to heart failure.



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www.cardiacwellnessinstitute.com

What is Ejection Fraction (EF) and how is it important?

Ejection fraction (EF) refers to the amount of blood being pumped out of the left ventricle each time it contracts, which is usually measured and expressed as a percentage. The left ventricle is the heart's main pumping chamber. It pumps oxygen-rich blood into the aorta and through it to the rest of the body.

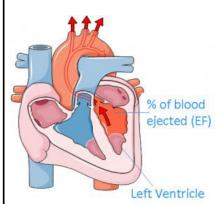
An EF that is below normal can be a sign of heart failure and also denotes how severe the condition of the heart is. The classification is:

- EF 50-70% denotes Normal heart function
- EF 41-49% denotes Borderline heart function
- EF 40% or lesser denotes Heart failure

Ejection fraction is a key indicator of heart health. It helps in assessing the severity of various kinds of heart disorders.

- If EF is normal but the individual has symptoms and signs of heart failure, they are said to have heart failure with preserved ejection fraction (HFpEF)
- If EF is 40% or lesser, the individual is said to have heart failure with reduced ejection fraction (HFrEF)

The treatment of both these conditions varies.





Small lifestyle changes can go a long way in managing heart failure...

- Quitting smoking
- Tracking your daily fluid intake
- Avoiding or limiting caffeine
- Avoiding alcohol
- Monitoring your blood pressure regularly
- Getting adequate rest
- Getting vaccinations against flu and pneumonia
- Following heart patient guidelines for sexual activity
- Keeping track of symptoms
- Managing stress
- Being physically active and exercising adequately
- Eating a heart-healthy diet

Myth - Heart failure cannot be treated

Fact - Though heart failure is a serious and progressive condition, you can manage it well and prevent worsening of the condition with appropriate lifestyle changes and medications.



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Exercise Training In Heart Failure

Should I exercise if I have heart failure?

YES you SHOULD! Cardiac rehabilitation with a focus on exercise training in heart failure is extremely important to avoid detoriation of your condition and to prevent further cardiac complications. Cardiac rehab along with medications not only enhances the functioning of your heart but also provides relief from symptoms.





What are the necessary precautions I should take prior to commencing cardiac rehab?

It is important to find out from your physician if you are fit to enroll in an exercise-based cardiac rehab program. You should also get your exercise capacity formally evaluated, as exercise will be prescribed based on it. Exercise training under supervision of a physiotherapist will be provided during the initial phase of the cardiac rehab program to ensure your safety and comfort.

Stories of heart failure patients currently undergoing cardiac rehab at our Institute

- 1. Mr. P is 60 years old, has had severe diabetes for almost 30 years and has undergone angioplasty for coronary blocks 1 year ago. He has heart failure (EF 42%) and is undergoing a cardiac rehab program since January 2020. He has become extremely confident about his health now as he is exercising regularly and following all our dietary and lifestyle guidelines.
- 2. Mr. G is 39 years old and underwent bypass surgery 3 months ago for severe heart attack. He has heart failure (EF 40%) and is improving dramatically on the cardiac rehab program that he is following since December 2019.



Myth - Heart failure occurs only in older adults

Fact - Heart failure can occur at any age. Based on the age of the patient, the underlying risk factors and causative conditions, the treatment will vary.



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What are the benefits of exercise training?

Exercise training helps in:

- Improving your heart functioning
- Enhancing skeletal muscle functions
- Decreasing fatigue and weakness
- Relieving breathlessness
- Enhancing metabolism
- Preventing swelling in ankle and legs
- Enhancing sleep quality
- Improving your quality of life



Dietary approaches for patients with heart failure



Nutritional management plays a key role in the management of heart failure. If you're diagnosed with heart failure, your doctor will prescribe medications to help treat it. In some cases, they might recommend surgery or medical devices to help your heart beat properly. Healthcare professionals might also encourage you to make changes to your lifestyle, especially your diet. Eating a healthy diet may help relieve symptoms of heart failure and stop it from getting worse or triggering exacerbations. A nutrient-rich diet can also promote good overall health.

The dietary modifications to be made depend on whether you have pre-existing diabetes, hypertension and cholesterol problems. The heart does not have to work as hard when you make some changes in your diet. If you consume too much salt in your diet or drink too much fluid, your body's water content may increase and make your heart work harder. This can worsen your heart's pumping capacity.

Myth - Heart failure diet is bland and tasteless

Fact - With the advice of an experienced dietician, you can make sure your heart failure diet is still tasty and appetizing. For example, minimal salt can be used for cooking and a suitable alternative like pepper, paprika powder or amchur (mango) powder can be added to enhance the taste.



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www.cardiacwellnessinstitute.com

What foods should I focus on if I have heart failure?

- Balanced diet is particularly important for persons with heart failure as the risk for developing electrolyte imbalance and vitamin deficiencies increases with the use of diuretics (water pills)
- Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables which are naturally low in sodium. Choose fresh foods, including lean meats, fish, poultry, dry and fresh legumes, eggs, milk, yogurt, plain rice, pasta and oatmeal
- Limit the intake of coffee, black tea or soda
- Some diuretics cause loss of potassium from your body and so you may be advised to consume foods rich in potassium such as sweet potatoes, bananas, spinach and avocado





Health tips for individuals with heart failure

- 1. Limit your daily salt (sodium) intake to 2000 mg (2 grams) to prevent fluid retention in the body.
- 2. It is important to limit the amount of fluids you drink. The amount can vary from person to person. Total fluid intake per day may be limited to 1000 2000 ml (1-2 liters) based on your health condition.
- 3. Check your weight at least twice a week. If you gain a few kilos within a few days, consult your physician immediately.
- 4. Eat a healthy balanced diet with more of fruits, veggies and whole grains and less of processed foods.
- 5. Manage your stress and care for your emotional wellbeing. Being stressed can increase your heart rate and blood pressure, two things that can worsen heart failure symptoms.









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Management modalities in heart failure

Medications, cardiac devices and heart transplantation are the three main treatment options in individuals with heart failure. Here are some important guidelines to follow while under treatment for heart failure:

- Adhere closely to the medications and dosages prescribed by your physician
- Do not modify or stop any medicine without consulting your physician
- If you develop any new symptoms like giddiness or excessive thirst, note it down and discuss with your healthcare team as it may be a side effect of the drugs you have been prescribed
- Check your blood pressure at regular intervals at home and maintain a log
- If you have a pacemaker or ventricular assist device, remember to carry your device information card at all times, especially while travelling
- Get your device checked by your healthcare team at regular intervals
- If you are a heart transplant recipient, remember that it's a new lease of life you have received and that your periodic health checks post transplant are extremely important
- Whatever the line of management you are receiving, it is extremely important to undergo a cardiac rehabilitation program to minimize complications and improve your quality of life

Past Events

Heart of the Matter - 01 February 2020







February 2020, Issue 12

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Awareness Program at Ganga Institute of Health Sciences 24 February 2020









February 2020, Issue 12

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