



# Patient education: Heart failure and atrial fibrillation (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is heart failure?

Heart failure is a condition in which the heart does not pump as well as it should. This causes the heart to lag behind in its job of moving blood through the body. As a result, fluid backs up in the body, and the organs do not get as much blood flow as they need. This can lead to symptoms such as swelling, trouble breathing, and feeling tired.

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## What is atrial fibrillation?

Atrial fibrillation is a problem with the heart's rhythm. In atrial fibrillation, the electrical signals that control the heartbeat become abnormal, and the top 2 heart chambers beat abnormally. When this happens, blood can pool in these chambers and form clots. These clots can travel up to the brain through the blood vessels and cause strokes. (A stroke is when a part of the brain is damaged because of a problem with blood flow.)

Besides raising your risk of stroke, atrial fibrillation can make you feel like your heart is racing, skipping beats, or beating out of sync. It can also make you feel dizzy or out of breath.

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## Can people have both heart failure and atrial fibrillation?

Yes, many people have both heart failure and atrial fibrillation. People usually have only 1 of these conditions at first. But then, their condition "stresses" the heart and affects the way that it works, causing the other condition to happen.

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## What should I know if I have both heart failure and atrial fibrillation?

If you have both conditions, and 1 gets worse, the other condition is likely to get worse, too.

If that happens, your doctor will try to figure out which condition is the bigger problem so that they can treat that problem first. But if both conditions are causing problems, you might need treatment for both at once.

The treatment will depend on:

- Your symptoms
- The cause of your heart failure or atrial fibrillation

To figure out the cause of your heart failure or atrial fibrillation, your doctor will talk with you and do an exam. They might also do tests.

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## How are heart failure and atrial fibrillation treated?

The treatments for heart failure and atrial fibrillation are different. But your doctor can treat both conditions at the same time.

Doctors treat heart failure with different types of medicines. Most people need to take more than 1 medicine every day. These medicines can improve your symptoms and help you feel better. Some medicines might help you live longer.

Treatment for atrial fibrillation can include 1 or more of the following:

- Medicines – Doctors can use different types of medicines to treat atrial fibrillation.
- A treatment called "cardioversion," which involves applying an electrical current to the heart to fix its rhythm
- A treatment called "ablation," which uses heat or cold to create a scar to block the flow of abnormal electrical signals
- A device called a "pacemaker," which is put in your body and sends electrical signals to the heart to control the heartbeat
- Surgery to create scar tissue in the heart to block the flow of electrical signals

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## When should I call the doctor?

Call your doctor or nurse if you have new or worse symptoms of heart failure or atrial fibrillation.

Symptoms of heart failure can include:

- Feeling tired or weak

- Trouble breathing
- Swelling in the feet, ankles, legs, or belly
- Sudden weight gain

This action plan ( [figure 1](#) and [figure 2](#)) lists the symptoms that you should watch for every day.

Symptoms of atrial fibrillation can include:

- Feeling like your heart is racing, skipping beats, or beating out of sync
- Feeling dizzy or like you are going to pass out
- Mild chest tightness or pain

You should also learn the signs and symptoms of a stroke ( [figure 3](#)). If you have any of these signs or symptoms, **call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**) or get to the hospital quickly.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Medicines for heart failure with reduced ejection fraction \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart failure \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Atrial fibrillation \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Catheter ablation for the heart \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Pacemakers \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cardioversion \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart failure \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Atrial fibrillation \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cardioversion \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Catheter ablation for abnormal heartbeats \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

**This topic retrieved from UpToDate on:** Jan 01, 2025.

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Topic 16443 Version 18.0

## GRAPHICS

### Heart failure action plan - Page 1

Every morning, when you get up, check how you are doing. Look for:



#### Changes in breathing

Ask yourself:

- Can I breathe as well as I usually can?
- Am I getting out of breath doing things that I can normally do without a problem?
- Am I coughing more than usual?
- Did I use more pillows than usual to sleep last night?

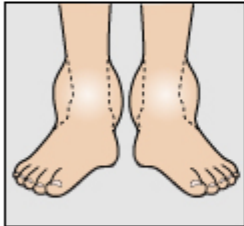


#### Changes in weight

Weigh yourself every morning after urinating but before eating.

Write down your weight on a calendar. Then, ask yourself:

- Has my weight gone up or gone down compared with yesterday?  
If so, by how many pounds?
- Has my weight gone up or gone down compared with a week ago?  
If so, by how many pounds?



#### New or worse swelling

Ask yourself:

- Are my ankles more swollen than usual?
- Do my socks or shoes feel tighter?
- Do my clothes feel tighter at the waist?
- Do my rings fit more snugly?



#### Changes in your ability to do everyday things


Ask yourself:

- Can I do all of the things that I normally do, such as get dressed on my own, make meals, or go for walks?
- Do I feel dizzy or more tired than usual?
- Do I have any new symptoms, like pressure or pain in my chest?
- Does my heartbeat feel strange or irregular?
- Do I feel like I might pass out?

See the next page to find out what you should do if any of these changes occur.

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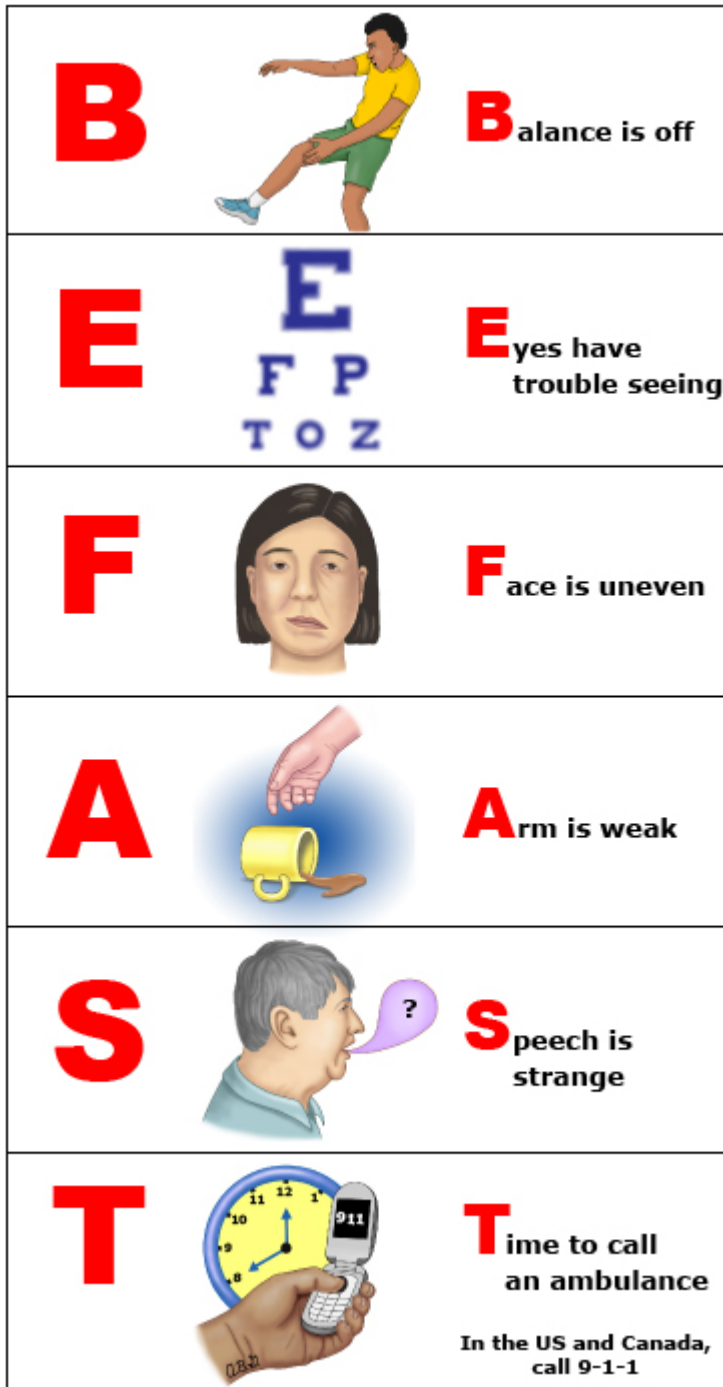
## Heart failure action plan – Page 2

Symptoms to watch for	Actions to take
<p><b>If you:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Have no trouble breathing or chest pain</li> <li>▪ Can do your normal activities</li> <li>▪ Have no new ankle swelling</li> <li>▪ Are sleeping normally</li> <li>▪ Have no changes in your weight (<i>weight: _____</i>)</li> <li>▪ Have a normal appetite</li> <li>▪ Feel good emotionally</li> </ul>	<p><b>Your symptoms are under control.</b></p> <p>You should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Keep taking your medicines every day as instructed</li> <li>▪ Keep weighing yourself every day and writing down your weight</li> <li>▪ Go to all of your medical appointments</li> </ul>
<p><b>If you:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Have more trouble breathing with activity</li> <li>▪ Are coughing</li> <li>▪ Have new ankle swelling or discomfort or swelling in the belly</li> <li>▪ Have gained 2 to 3 pounds in 1 week</li> <li>▪ Have trouble sleeping</li> <li>▪ Have less of an appetite than usual</li> <li>▪ Have mild sadness or depression</li> </ul>	<p><b>You might need a change in your medicine.</b></p> <p>You should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Call your doctor, and ask them what to do</li> </ul> <p><i>Doctor's name:</i> _____</p> <p><i>Phone number:</i> _____</p>
<p><b>If you:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Have trouble breathing, even at rest</li> <li>▪ Are coughing a lot</li> <li>▪ Have worsening ankle swelling or discomfort or swelling in the belly</li> <li>▪ Have gained more than 2 to 3 pounds overnight, or 5 pounds in 1 week</li> <li>▪ Cannot lie flat</li> <li>▪ Have nausea or no appetite</li> <li>▪ Have sadness or depression and are having trouble coping</li> <li>▪ Feel very confused, dizzy, or lightheaded</li> <li>▪ Have chest pain or other signs of a heart attack</li> </ul>	<p><b>You need medical attention right away!</b></p> <p>You should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Call your doctor, and ask them what to do</li> </ul> <p><i>Doctor's name:</i> _____</p> <p><i>Phone number:</i> _____</p> <p><b>If you can't reach your doctor right away, call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1).</b></p> 

Adapted from: *Heart Failure Signs and Symptoms: Self-Check Plan for HF Management*. American Heart Association 2022. Available at: <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/heart-failure/warning-signs-of-heart-failure> (Accessed on July 11, 2024).

Graphic 75501 Version 7.0

## BE FAST to help remember stroke symptoms



One way to help remember stroke symptoms is to think of the words "BE FAST." If a person shows any of these signs, **call for an ambulance right away** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**).

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