



Patient education: When your lungs fill with fluid (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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Why do the lungs fill with fluid when a person has heart failure?

When you have heart failure, your heart does not pump as well as it should. It does not squeeze or fill as well as it should. As a result, your heart struggles to keep blood moving, but it lags behind. The organs in your body might not get as much blood as they used to, especially when you exercise. Also, fluid builds up in the body.

Fluid can build up in the feet and ankles. That's why people with heart failure sometimes get swollen ankles ([figure 1](#)).

Fluid can also build up in the lungs, which can be life-threatening. That's why people with heart failure sometimes have trouble breathing. Fluid in the lungs is the number 1 reason people with heart failure need to go to the hospital. But it is often avoidable.

To keep heart failure from getting worse, and to keep yourself breathing as well as possible, it is very important to keep your body from holding onto extra fluid. That's why it is so important to take your heart failure medicines and look for warning signs of extra fluid.

Why are medicines for heart failure so important?

Medicines to treat heart failure can help you feel better and live longer. They can help keep fluid out of your lungs and help you breathe better. Missing even 1 dose can make a big difference in how you feel.

One type of heart failure medicine is called a "diuretic" (sometimes called a water pill). It helps the body get rid of extra salt and fluid. That way, fluid is less likely to build up in the ankles, belly, or (most importantly) lungs.

Some people skip their diuretic because they do not like having to go urinate so often. But urinating a lot means the medicine is working, and means your lungs are less likely to fill with fluid.

Ask your doctor or nurse which of your medicines is a diuretic. The most commonly used diuretic for heart failure is [furosemide](#) (brand name: Lasix).

What are the symptoms of fluid in the lungs?

When heart failure is getting worse and you have fluid building up in your lungs, you might have these symptoms:

- Weight gain
- Increased swelling in the feet, ankles, legs, or other body parts
- Increased tiredness or trouble breathing

If you have 1 or more of these symptoms, take action. Your body is telling you things are starting to go wrong.

You and your doctor or nurse should write up a heart failure "action plan" ([figure 2](#) and [figure 3](#)). This tells you what to do if you have signs your heart failure is getting worse.

Take your action plan seriously. Keep it on the refrigerator or someplace where you can easily find it. If you follow your action plan closely, you might be able to avoid going to the hospital, and you will know when to call an ambulance to bring you to the hospital.

Why must I weigh myself every day?

Water is heavy, so your weight will go up if your body is holding onto extra fluid. If you weigh yourself every day, you will know right away when fluid starts to build up. Weight gain can be an early sign your heart failure is getting worse. If you have a weight change, you can take steps to keep the problem from getting worse.

Here's what you should do:

- Weigh yourself every morning after you urinate and before you eat or drink.
- Use the same scale and wear about the same amount of clothing (or wear nothing) every time you weigh yourself.
- Keep a chart near the scale, and **write down** your weight every day.
- Each time you write down your weight, check if the number has gone up from the day before and the week before. If so, follow your action plan.

For most people, gaining 2 to 3 pounds in 1 day is cause for concern that your body is holding onto extra fluid. Gaining 5 pounds in 1 week is also a bad sign.

Why must I check for swelling every day?

Swelling is another sign your body is holding onto extra fluid and that your heart failure is getting worse. If any part of your body looks more swollen than usual, don't ignore it, even if you feel normal.

More on this topic

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

[Patient education: Heart failure with preserved ejection fraction \(The Basics\)](#)

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

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

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

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

[Patient education: Exercise and heart failure \(The Basics\)](#)

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

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

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

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Topic 85803 Version 9.0

GRAPHICS

Pitting edema



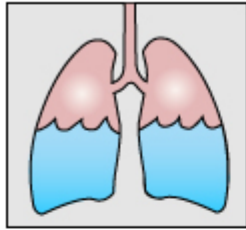
"Edema" means swelling. It happens when fluid collects in small spaces around tissues and organs inside the body.

Sometimes, pushing on the swollen area can leave a temporary dimple or dent in the skin. This is called "pitting edema."

Graphic 61706 Version 13.0

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?

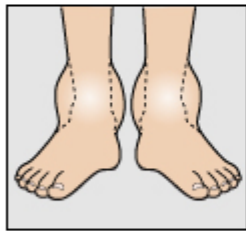


Changes in weight

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

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).

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