

Exercise and Heart Failure

Why is exercise good for me?

Exercise can help relieve some of the symptoms of heart failure. Research proves that people with heart failure who exercise report a better quality of life. Over time, exercise can help you feel less tired, and make you stronger. Your mood can improve. Exercise can help you to gain the energy you need to do more of what you enjoy!

Where do I start?

Exercise is only safe for you if your heart failure is stable. Pay attention to how you feel to help you decide if you should exercise that day. Ask yourself these questions before every exercise session:

Pre-Exercise Checklist

- Do you feel more tired than usual?
- Are you more short-of-breath than usual?
- Do you have any chest pain?
- Do you notice any swelling in your legs or abdomen?
- Has your weight increased by more than 2 lbs over the last 24 hours?
- Do you need more pillows than usual to sleep comfortably?

If you answer “yes” to any of the above questions, you need to think about whether you should exercise that day. Perhaps you could do some kind of exercise, but for less time and using less effort than your usual routine.

What kind of exercise can I do?

Choose an activity that you will enjoy, and adjust that activity to how you feel each day. Here are some examples:

- walking on a treadmill, in a mall, or outside
- cycling
- dancing
- swimming
- aerobics, including water aerobics
- gardening



With regular exercise, some people with heart failure have been able to work up to activities like jogging or cross country skiing.

Some people enjoy exercising at home using their own personal fitness equipment, like a treadmill or stationary bicycle. Other people may prefer to go to a gym or fitness center, or to exercise outdoors when the weather is pleasant. Exercise may be more fun if you include your favorite music, your favorite program on the television, or the company of a good friend.



How much should I do?

It is normal to have “good” days and “bad” days! The trick to exercising with heart failure is having a plan for the good and the bad days. Consider how you feel each day and then decide how long and how hard you will exercise. Decrease your exercise time and effort on the days you are having more symptoms than usual.

Exercise Goals

Always start out slowly and “listen” to your body when developing your exercise goals. Take note of how you feel before, during and after exercise. You may notice the effects of exercise for as long as 48 hours after your session!

Always begin each exercise session with a “warm-up” and end each session with a “cool down.” The warm up and cool down can be the same type of exercise you’ve chosen for your session, but should be done at a slower pace. They usually are 5 minutes each.

When you first start exercising, you may want to limit your sessions to 2-3 times a week with 1-2 days of rest in between.

Here is an example of a beginner workout session and how you might progress:

Day 1

Walk slowly and steadily at your own pace for 5-10 minutes. If you are short of breath, slow down or STOP! If you need to stop before 5 minutes, take a short rest and then continue walking at a slower pace.

Day 2

Rest, paying attention to any unusual symptoms. If you feel more tired than usual, this may be a sign that you have overdone it!

Day 3

Rest, paying attention to any unusual symptoms.

Day 4

Walk slowly and steadily for 5-10 minutes as tolerated.

Day 5

Rest, paying attention to any unusual symptoms.

Day 6

Rest, paying attention to any unusual symptoms.

Day 7

Walk slowly and steadily for 5-10 minutes as tolerated.



Continue with this pattern for a month. After that, if you are feeling stronger, consider adding another minute onto the length of your walk.

As you get stronger, you can add 1-2 minutes onto the length of your walk every 1-2 weeks.

Weight Training

You may want to begin lifting weights in addition to the other kinds of exercise you do. Many people with heart failure notice quick benefits with weight training, like improved strength and muscle tone when lifting as little as 1-5 pounds. Always check with your doctor or a Cardiac Rehabilitation professional before starting any kind of weight training.



Remember: these are general guidelines for exercising and heart failure. If you are unsure of any of these suggestions, please check with your healthcare professional.

One of the best ways to stay healthy is to stay active.

Good luck with your exercise!