



## Healthy lifestyle



**The changes that patients make to their lifestyle, are as important a part of treatment as their medicines.<sup>1</sup>**

**However, making lifestyle changes can be hard for any of us.**

We know that some changes, such as giving up smoking, losing weight and restricting salt intake, can be particularly challenging for some patients<sup>2</sup>. However, the benefits of lifestyle change in heart failure are so great, it is worth making the effort.

Let's now look at some of the changes you may need to make and tips that can help you adopt new habits and stick with them. Please read on to find out more.





## Good habits

Your healthcare team is likely to suggest that you take up several new habits (and perhaps get rid of some bad habits) in order to manage your condition, feel better and enjoy your best possible quality of life. The changes required will, of course, depend on your own particular situation, but here are some of the most frequently suggested:

### HEALTHY DIET

- Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day.
- Choose lean sources of protein (if you are a vegetarian, don't rely on cheese too much as a source of protein).
- Have starchy carbohydrates, such as potatoes, rice, beans and grains, at every meal.
- Eat at least two servings of fish per week, at least one of which should be oily fish.
- Reduce your intake of saturated fat, sugar and salt. Cutting back on salt is very important, and your healthcare team will give you specific instructions about how to reduce salt intake.
- Additionally, your doctor may also ask you to manage your fluid intake.



## SMOKING AND ALCOHOL

- Giving up smoking is the single best thing you can do for your health.
- Alcohol can damage heart muscle, raise blood pressure, affect the heart's rhythm and change your fluid balance. It can also damage your sleep quality and worsen the symptoms of heart failure. Make sure to ask your doctor for advice if you wish to control or reduce the amount of alcohol in your life.

## SLEEP AND REST

- It is very important that you have sufficient, good quality sleep and rest. Rest is a necessity and not an indulgence, getting enough rest and sleep is part of your self-care in heart failure.

## BE ACTIVE

- Most people can be active to some degree, and exercise can be very beneficial. It can reduce your symptoms, improve the flow of oxygen around your body, raise your energy levels and help to control your weight. However, some types of exercise are not suitable for people with your condition, so make sure you talk to your healthcare team before you begin any form of exercise or change your exercise habits.
- When you exercise, don't overdo it — in any case, you will probably find that the amount of exercise you do will increase over time. Make sure you schedule in sufficient rest.
- You may wish to seek out further information on exercise from professional organisations or support groups.



## Developing and maintaining better habits

Taking up healthier lifestyle habits is a great idea because not only does it help you to manage your condition, it can also give you a real psychological boost. Changing your lifestyle successfully is likely to increase your confidence and give you back a sense of control.

Getting rid of old habits and adopting new ones is rarely easy, and we know that in heart failure, many patients think they are sticking to their new behaviours, but evidence shows that when they are monitored, that isn't the case<sup>3</sup>. It's very easy to 'fall off the wagon'! So it is a good idea to commit to change, decide what your new habits are going to be and monitor your progress.

Ideally, lifestyle change should be something that you plan with your healthcare team, so make sure you keep talking to them, and don't be afraid to ask for help or advice if you need it.

Here are some other tips that you might find useful, as you try to establish new health habits:

- **Clearly identify the habit that you want to form, and the benefits it will bring.** Write these down and keep them somewhere prominent. Out of sight is out of mind — so keep your goals in sight, literally!
- In some cases you have to make the entire change at once, but in other cases this can be too overwhelming. Sometimes it is helpful to **start with small changes and build up to the bigger picture**: exercise, for example.
- **Use SMART goals** (goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound).
- **If you falter don't give up, remind yourself that these things happen and go back to your new, healthy habits.** Don't use this as an excuse.
- **Tell other people what you are going to do** — they can hold you accountable.



- **Monitor your progress.** Some people also find it helpful to record bad behaviours (for example when they eat something unhealthy, or forget an exercise session) but if you do this, don't be hard on yourself, just use it as a nudge to keep yourself on track.
- **Reward yourself (in a heart-friendly way) for achievements.** Look actively for reasons to reward yourself, because rewards will increase your motivation and boost your mood.



**Tracking your progress in sticking to new habits is a great way to maintain a healthier lifestyle. Remember that keeping a diary can help you keep track of the changes you want to make!**

If you happen to have an urgent medical concern, please call your doctor, go to your local emergency room, or call your local Emergency Contact number. Remember, your doctor is your primary source for information on your condition and treatment. Be sure to speak with them if you have any questions or concerns.

#### References

1. Thornhill K, Lyons AC, Nouwen A, Lip GY. Experiences of living with congestive heart failure: a qualitative study. *Br J Health Psychol* 2008 Feb; 13 (pt 1): 155-75.
2. Paul S, Sneed NV. Strategies for behavior change in patients with heart failure. *Am J Crit Care* 2004 Jul; 13 (4): 305-13.
3. Sneed NV, Paul SC. Readiness for behavioral changes in patients with heart failure. *Am J Crit Care* 2003 Sep; 12 (5): 444-53.