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What a heart failure diagnosis really means for you

(ARA) - Hearing the words "heart failure" from your doctor is a frightening thing. If that is your diagnosis, you're not alone - more than 5 million Americans are affected by heart failure. But while it is certainly serious, it is not quite as ominous as it sounds. The good news is that there have been tremendous strides in heart care treatment in recent years, which enables patients with the disease to live full, active, normal lives.

One key thing to remember about heart failure is what it actually means. It's not a death sentence; it means that your heart muscle has changed. It's either weakened or it has become stiff, which means that it has to work harder to pump blood throughout your body.

"Many people with heart failure can lead relatively normal, active lives. The key is early diagnosis and treatment," says Dr. Stephen Gottlieb, chair, Heart Failure Society of America Education Committee. "New treatments can be very effective in slowing and stopping the progression of the disease, and in some cases can even reverse the process."

It's when heart failure goes undiagnosed and untreated that things go wrong, which is why it is the leading cause of hospitalization in people older than 65. Many people have questions about this common disease, and the more you know, the better you'll be able deal with a heart failure diagnosis.

Question: What causes heart failure?

Answer: Heart failure develops following an injury to the heart. Heart attacks, long-term untreated high blood pressure, alcohol abuse, or an abnormality of one of the heart valves can all cause the damage that leads to heart failure. You are also at increased risk if you have a history of a heart murmur, suffer from enlargement of the heart or have a family history of enlarged hearts, or if you are diabetic. In some cases, the exact cause of heart failure is not known.

Question: What symptoms should I watch for?

Answer: Symptoms of heart failure include shortness of breath even when the activity you are engaging in is not strenuous; difficulty breathing in a laying down position; weight gain and fluid retention that lead to swelling in the legs and ankles; and general fatigue and weakness. Of course, many other health problems may share some of these symptoms, so it's important to talk to your doctor for an accurate diagnosis. Early diagnosis and treatment are vital.

Question: I've been diagnosed with heart failure. What do I do now?

Answer: Take charge. Working with your doctor, you can find a treatment plan that will help you live the healthiest life possible for you. Your treatment will include diet modifications, an exercise plan and certain medications. Limit your salt and alcohol intake. If you smoke, quit. Lose weight if your doctor advises it and exercise regularly. And be sure to weigh yourself daily and report any sudden weight gain or swelling to your doctor.

Once you've been diagnosed with heart failure, it's important to take good care of yourself and to enlist the support of family and friends. To learn more about how to live well with heart failure, visit www.abouthf.org to download information or request to have complimentary materials mailed to you. All the information on this site is designed for patients and is easy to read and understand.

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