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Congestive Heart Failure

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What is Congestive Heart Failure (also referred to as Heart Failure)

Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) is a medical condition where the heart cannot meet the needs of the body for oxygen and nutrients. Currently there are about five million people in the United States diagnosed with Heart Failure and approximately 500,000 newly diagnosed cases each year. The cost nationally for treating patients with this condition accounts for about 35 billion healthcare dollars per year.

Types of Heart Failure

There are two types of congestive heart failure: systolic and diastolic. Systolic heart failure is characterized by a heart that does not pump blood well. Heart function is measured by a number referred to as the ejection fraction. In order to understand what an ejection fraction is, imagine having 100 marbles in your heart and for each heart beat, 60 marbles are pumped out into your system. In this example you would have an ejection fraction of 60%. The normal range for an ejection fraction is between 45-70%. Diastolic heart failure is the inability of the heart to relax. The heart muscle is stiff and the pressure builds up in the heart. In this case, the ejection fraction can be normal.

Symptoms and Causes of Heart Failure

The most common symptoms of Congestive Heart Failure are shortness of breath, decreased ability to participate in activities and leg swelling. Congestive heart failure is commonly caused by other diseases of the heart with the most common being Coronary Artery Disease (CAD). When the heart is damaged, it can enlarge and become congested. Hypertension or high blood pressure can also lead to heart failure, especially if it is not treated for many years.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Your doctor or healthcare provider can diagnose heart failure through a careful medical history and physical exam. A chest x-ray and blood tests may be ordered as well to help in the diagnosis. If your doctor tells you that you have heart failure there is great hope in treating your condition. Medications have been shown to prolong life and improve your symptoms. A visit with your doctor or healthcare provider and following the plan of care are the most important steps in getting better.