

Patient information: Diastolic heart failure (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is diastolic heart failure? — Diastolic heart failure is a type of heart failure. Heart failure is a condition in which the heart does not pump well. This causes the heart to lag behind in its job of moving blood throughout the body. This can lead to symptoms such as swelling, trouble breathing, and feeling tired.

There are 2 main types of heart failure:

- In **diastolic heart failure**, the heart is too stiff. When the heart pumps, it doesn't relax and fill with blood normally.
- In **systolic heart failure**, the heart is too weak. When the heart pumps, it doesn't squeeze normally.

These differences affect how much the heart squeezes with each heartbeat. With each squeeze, the heart pumps blood forward out of the heart. The amount of the blood in the heart that is pumped out of the heart with each heartbeat is called the "ejection fraction" (also called the "EF"). People with systolic heart failure have an ejection fraction that is lower than normal. People with diastolic heart failure have a normal ejection fraction. Because of this, diastolic heart failure is sometimes called "heart failure with normal ejection fraction" or "HFNEF."

What are the symptoms of diastolic heart failure? — Common symptoms of diastolic heart failure include:

- Trouble breathing – At first, people might have trouble breathing only with activity. Over time, they can also have trouble breathing at rest or when lying down.
- Swelling in the feet, ankles, legs, or belly
- Feeling tired

Is there a test for diastolic heart failure? — Yes. If your doctor or nurse thinks you might have this condition, he or she will order some of the following tests:

- Blood tests
- Chest X-ray – This test can show if there is fluid in the lungs. It also shows the general shape of the heart and large blood vessels in the chest.
- Electrocardiogram (also called "ECG" or "EKG") – This test measures the electrical activity in the heart.
- Echocardiogram (also called an "echo") – This test uses sound waves to create a picture of the heart as it beats.
- Stress test – During this test, a doctor records your ECG while you exercise on a treadmill or bike, or get medicine to make your heart pump faster.
- Cardiac catheterization (also called "cardiac cath") – During this test, the doctor puts a thin tube into a blood vessel in your leg or arm. Then he or she moves the tube up to your heart. When the tube is in your heart or blood vessels, he or she will take measurements. The doctor might also put a dye that shows up on an X-ray into the tube. This can show if any arteries in your heart are narrowed or blocked. This part of the test is called "coronary angiography."

How is diastolic heart failure treated? — Treatment usually includes:

- Taking medicines – Doctors can use different types of medicines to treat diastolic heart failure. The right medicines for you will depend on your symptoms and other medical conditions. Some medicines will reduce your symptoms, such as swelling or trouble breathing. This will help you feel better and be more able to do everyday tasks.

If you have high blood pressure, your doctor might prescribe medicines to control it. If you have a heart rhythm problem called “atrial fibrillation,” your doctor might prescribe medicine to control your heart rate. If you have fluid in your lungs or swelling in your legs, your doctor might prescribe medicine called a “diuretic” (water pill) to help with these symptoms.

It’s important to take your medicines every day, even if you feel well. Tell your doctor or nurse if you can’t afford your medicines or if they cause side effects. There are often ways to help with these issues.

- Treating your coronary heart disease (if you have it) – In coronary heart disease, the arteries that supply blood to the heart get clogged. Treatment can include medicines, a procedure to unblock a clogged artery, or surgery.

What else can I do on my own to protect my heart? — To help feel better and reduce the chances that you will need to go to the hospital, you can do the following:

- Call your doctor or nurse if you are dizzy or weak, or if you lose or gain weight suddenly. Weigh yourself every morning after you urinate but before you eat breakfast. Wear roughly the same amount of clothing every time.
 - Follow the action plan your doctor gives you. An action plan is a list of instructions that tells you what to do if your symptoms change. To use an action plan, watch your symptoms closely and weigh yourself every day. If you do not feel well or if you lose or gain weight suddenly, look at your action plan to see what to do ([figure 1](#) and [figure 2](#)).
 - Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1) if you have chest pain or other signs of a heart attack ([figure 3](#)).
 - Lose weight, if you are overweight.
 - Stop smoking.
 - Cut down on alcohol if you have more than 1 drink a day (for women) or 2 drinks a day (for men).
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