



Sodium and Heart Failure

Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) occurs when the heart does not pump as well as it should, and the blood backs up in your veins. This backup can lead to shortness of breath, ankle, foot or leg swelling, congestion, and fatigue.

Lifestyle changes may help manage CHF.

1. **Limit sodium intake.** A diet high in sodium can cause your body to retain water, forcing your heart to work much harder to pump this extra water.
 - Use healthy seasoning alternatives such as garlic powder, Mrs. Dash®, and fresh herbs or spices.
 - Choose unseasoned fresh or frozen meats and vegetables.
 - Fast food and sit down restaurants use a lot of salt to season their foods. Try to minimize meals eaten out. Ask restaurants to prepare food without salt.
2. **Read the nutrition label.** The salt content of foods is listed as “sodium” in milligrams (mg). Eat foods that have less than 140 mg per serving.
3. **Limit fluid intake if recommended by your doctor.** Sometimes your body will retain too much fluid if you drink too much liquid. Discuss with your doctor how often you should weigh yourself and if you should keep a record of your daily fluid intake.
4. **Medications help to control CHF.** Take your pills at the same time everyday and do not skip a dose. Ask your pharmacist or doctor about the possible side effects of your medication, and if they need to be taken with food.
5. **Smoking:** Smoking narrows your blood vessels and reduces the amount of oxygen in your blood. The VA has a smoking cessation clinic, ask your doctor for more information.
6. **Physical activity may improve your health.** Start slowly and talk to your doctor about how much activity is right for you. Avoid over exertion, especially activity that causes dizziness, moderate shortness of breath, or chest discomfort.
7. **Alcohol:** Avoid alcohol because it may worsen CHF.

Contact your local VA dietitian for more information.