

Heart Failure Glossary

ACE (angiotensin converting enzyme) inhibitors — A type of heart failure medication that works by preventing the body from creating angiotensin, a substance in the blood that causes vessels to tighten and raises blood pressure. In large-scale studies, ACE inhibitors have been proven to slow the progression of heart failure.

Advance Directive — A written document that states a person's healthcare choices and names someone to make those choices, should the person become unable to make their own decisions about medical care. The most common types of Advance Directives are a living will and a durable power of attorney for healthcare.

Anemia — A reduction in the amount of oxygen-carrying red blood cells. Anemia can have many causes, but the most common is a lack of iron in the body. Also known as iron-poor blood.

Angiography — An X-ray test used to detect diseases of the blood vessels, such as weakening of the vessel walls and the narrowing or blocking of vessels. The X-ray is taken after the vessels have been injected with a substance that allows them to be seen on film.

Angioplasty — A procedure that reopens blocked blood vessels to the heart. A physician inserts a hollow needle (catheter) into the diseased artery and pushes a small deflated balloon into the blocked section. Then the physician inflates the balloon to widen the artery.

Angiotensin II receptor blocker — A medication that blocks the action of a special chemical called angiotensin, which normally raises the heart rate and blood pressure.

Arrhythmia — An abnormal rhythm or rate of the heartbeat caused by disturbances in the movement of electrical impulses through the heart.

Atrial fibrillation — Rapid, uneven contractions in the upper heart chambers (atria), which cause the lower chambers (ventricles) to beat irregularly.

Atrium — One of the two upper chambers of the heart.

Beta blockers — Medications that reduce the heart's tendency to beat faster by blocking specific receptors ("beta receptors") on the cells that make up the heart.

Blood thinners — Medications, such as warfarin and heparin, used to prevent blood clotting. Some people with heart failure are prescribed blood thinners to reduce the risk of stroke.

Calcium channel blocker — A drug that prevents calcium from entering the heart's muscle cells. This causes the muscles to relax, lowering the heart rate.

Cardiac rehabilitation — A supervised program of increasing exercise, mental support and training to allow a person with a heart condition to resume normal activities.

Cardiologist — A doctor who diagnoses and treats heart problems.

Cardiomyopathy — Any weakening or deformity of the heart muscle that causes decreased pumping force. This leads to less-efficient circulation of blood through the lungs and the rest of the body.

Cardiomyoplasty — An investigational surgical treatment for heart failure that involves taking muscles from the person's back or abdomen and wrapping them around the heart. Its goal is to increase the heart's pumping power.

Caregiver — Anyone who helps a chronically ill patient cope with an illness. Caregivers can be home healthcare workers, family members or friends. They assist in many ways, from making sure patients take their medications properly to helping out with day-to-day activities.

Chronic illness — An illness or condition that develops slowly and persists for a long time. Heart failure is almost always a chronic illness.

Congenital heart disease — Any heart condition or abnormality that a person was born with.

Congestive heart failure — A common form of heart failure that results in a patient retaining excessive fluid, often leading to swelling of the legs and ankles and congestion in the lungs.

Coronary artery bypass — A procedure used to reroute the blood supply around a blocked section of a coronary artery. Surgeons remove healthy blood vessels from another part of the body, such as a leg or the chest wall. Then they surgically attach the vessels to the diseased artery to let the blood flow around the blocked section.

Coronary artery disease — A condition caused by thickening of the walls of the arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle. When these arteries become blocked, the heart is deprived of oxygen and can become damaged. Severe cases can result in heart attack.

Defibrillator — A device that delivers pacing or an electric counter shock to the heart when an abnormal rhythm is detected. A surgically implantable version is called a pacemaker.

Diabetes — A condition in which the body doesn't produce the right amount of insulin, the hormone that

allows cells to absorb glucose (sugar) from the bloodstream. Some people with diabetes must inject themselves with insulin every day to maintain a healthy glucose level. Others are able to control the condition with pills or a special diet.

Diastolic pressure — The pressure of blood inside arteries when the heart is at rest. This is the bottom number in a blood pressure reading.

Digoxin (or digitalis) — A medication that increases the force of the heart's contractions and slows certain types of irregular heartbeats (arrhythmia).

Diuretic — A medication that promotes the formation and release of urine. It helps to reduce fluid overload in people with heart failure. Also called a water pill.

Drug interaction — A change in the effect of a drug when taken with a certain other drug or food. Its effect may increase or decrease, or a side effect may occur.

Dyspnea — Difficult or labored breathing, often caused by heart conditions.

Dysrhythmia — A disturbance in heart rhythm, sometimes used as an alternative to the term "arrhythmia."

Echocardiography — A test that obtains an image of the structure and motion of the heart using ultrasound (inaudible, high-frequency sound waves). Used to detect cardiomyopathy and other abnormalities of the heart wall, valves and large blood vessels.

Edema — An abnormal accumulation of fluid in body tissues. Edema is common in the legs, ankles and lungs of people with heart failure.

Ejection fraction — The amount of blood released during each contraction of the lower ventricle of the heart. It's usually expressed as a percentage: an ejection fraction of 60 percent means that 60 percent of the total amount of blood in the left ventricle is expelled with each heartbeat.

Electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG) — A record of the electrical activity of the heart, allowing diagnosis of abnormal heart conditions.

Endocarditis — Inflammation of the lining of the heart and the heart valves, usually due to bacterial infection.

Heart attack — Sudden death of a portion of the heart muscle caused by a sudden decrease in blood supply to that area. Also known as myocardial infarction or MI.

Heart disease, ischemic — The most prevalent form of heart disease, in which narrowed or blocked coronary arteries result in decreased blood supply.

Heart failure — The inability of the heart to keep up with its workload. When someone has this condition, their heart can't pump enough blood to the lungs and the rest of the body. Heart failure is often a chronic condition that can be treated with medications, diet and other lifestyle changes, and in some cases, surgery.

Heart transplant — Surgery that replaces a damaged heart with a healthy heart taken from a donor who has been declared brain dead.

Heart valve — One of the four structures in the heart that control the flow of blood by opening and closing with each heartbeat. The valves permit blood to flow in only one direction.

Hypertension — The medical term for abnormally high blood pressure.

Hyperthyroidism — Over activity of the thyroid gland, leading to overproduction of thyroid hormones. It can make the body's metabolism overactive, leading to symptoms such as weight loss and rapid heart rate.

Hypotension — Abnormally low blood pressure.

Left-ventricular assist device — A mechanical pump used to aid the natural pumping action of the heart's left ventricle.

Left-ventricular heart failure — Heart failure in which the left side of the heart must work harder to pump the same amount of blood. This type of heart failure usually causes breathing difficulties.

MUGA (Multigated Acquisition) — A test in which a radioactive tracer is injected into the bloodstream and scanned as it passes through the heart. A computer then calculates the size and shape of a patient's ventricles based on the amount and distribution of radiation they emit.

Myocardial infarction — Sudden death of a portion of the heart muscle caused by a sudden decrease in blood supply to that area. See Heart attack.

Myocarditis — Inflammation of the heart muscle.

Potassium — A mineral that, together with sodium and calcium, regulates the body's water balance, maintains normal heart rhythm, and is responsible for nerve impulse conduction and muscle contraction.

Primary care doctor — A general internist or family physician who provides patients with routine preventive healthcare and is their first contact when medical problems arise.

Pulmonary edema — Fluid in lung tissues, often caused by congestive heart failure.

Right-ventricular heart failure — Heart failure caused by damage to the right-side chambers of the heart, leading to decreased blood flow, and swelling in the hands, legs and abdomen.

Side effect — Any reaction that results from a medication or therapy. Heart failure medications can cause side effects such as headaches, nausea, dizziness, kidney complications and low blood pressure.

Sodium — A mineral that, together with potassium and calcium, regulates the body's water balance, maintains normal heart rhythm, and is responsible for nerve impulse conduction and muscle contraction. Excessive intake of sodium from food contributes to high blood pressure in some people. In people who already have high blood pressure, too much sodium may increase the risk of stroke, heart disease and kidney damage.

Stress test — An exercise test that examines how well the heart works. Patients are asked to walk on a treadmill to increase their heart rate. During the test, a doctor monitors electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) readings from the heart to check for any heart rhythm irregularities.

Systolic pressure — The pressure of blood inside arteries when the heart contracts. This is the top number in a blood pressure reading.

Vaccine — Weakened or dead germs, given by injection, that protect against infectious disease. People with heart failure should receive a yearly influenza vaccine and a one-time pneumococcal vaccine (to guard against pneumonia).

Valve replacement — Surgery to replace a defective or diseased heart valve.

Vasoconstriction — A narrowing of a blood vessel, causing decreased blood flow to a part of the body.

Vasodilator — A medication that causes widening or relaxation of blood vessel walls. Examples include ACE inhibitors, angiotensin II receptor blockers, beta blockers, calcium channel blockers, natriuretic peptides and nitrates.

Ventricle — One of the two lower chambers of the heart that receive blood from the atria (upper chambers). The right ventricle pumps blood to the lungs and the left ventricle pumps blood to the rest of the body.