



# Heart Failure: Avoiding Triggers for Sudden Heart Failure

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## Overview

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Triggers are things that make your heart failure symptoms worse. Triggers upset the delicate balance in your body, causing fluid to build up in your lungs and your body. This makes it even harder for your heart to pump. Then your heart failure symptoms get worse.

Sometimes triggers can lead to sudden heart failure.

Triggers include eating too much salt, missing a dose of medicine, and exercising too hard. Not all people are sensitive to or react to the same triggers. What may cause symptom changes in one person may not have the same effect on someone else.

## How can you avoid triggers for sudden heart failure?

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### Watch for changes in your weight and condition

- Weigh yourself without clothing at the same time each day. Record your weight. Call your doctor if you have sudden weight gain, such as more than 2 to 3 pounds in a day or 5 pounds in a week. (Your doctor may suggest a different range of weight gain.) A sudden weight gain may mean that your heart failure is getting worse.
- Keep a daily record of your symptoms. Write down any changes in how you feel, such as new shortness of breath. Also record if your ankles are more swollen than usual and if you feel more tired than usual. Note anything that you ate or did that could have triggered these changes.

### Limit sodium

Sodium causes your body to hold on to extra water. This may cause your heart failure symptoms to get worse. People get most of their sodium from processed foods. Fast food and restaurant meals also tend to be very high in sodium.

- Your doctor may suggest that you limit sodium. Your doctor can tell you how much sodium is right for you. This includes limiting sodium in cooked and packaged foods.
- Read food labels on cans and food packages. They tell you how much sodium you get in one serving. Check the serving size. If you eat more than one serving, you are getting more sodium.

- Be aware that sodium can come in forms other than salt, including monosodium glutamate (MSG), sodium citrate, and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda). You can sometimes ask for food without MSG or salt.
- Slowly reducing salt will help you adjust to the taste. Take the salt shaker off the table.
- Flavor your food with garlic, lemon juice, onion, vinegar, herbs, and spices instead of salt. Do not use soy sauce, steak sauce, onion salt, garlic salt, mustard, or ketchup on your food, unless it is labeled "low-sodium" or "low-salt."
- Make your own salad dressings, sauces, and ketchup without adding salt.
- Use fresh or frozen ingredients, instead of canned ones, whenever you can. Choose low-sodium canned goods.
- Eat less processed food and food from restaurants, including fast food.

### Exercise as directed

Moderate, regular exercise is very good for your heart. It improves your blood flow and helps control your weight. But too much exercise can stress your heart and cause a heart failure flare-up.

- Check with your doctor before you start an exercise program. Your doctor can help you make a plan to be active in a safe way.
- When you exercise, watch for signs that your heart is working too hard. You are pushing yourself too hard if you cannot talk while you are exercising. If you become short of breath or dizzy or have chest pain, stop, sit down, and rest.
- Do not exercise when you do not feel well.

### Take medicines correctly

- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.
- Make a list of all the medicines you take. Include those prescribed to you by other doctors and any over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or supplements you take. Take this list with you when you go to any doctor.
- Take your medicines at the same time every day. It may help you to post a list of all the medicines you take every day and what time of day you take them.
- Make taking your medicine as simple as you can. Plan times to take your medicines when you are doing other things, such as eating a meal or getting ready for bed. This will make it easier to remember to take your medicines.
- Get organized. Use helpful tools, such as daily or weekly pill containers.

## Related Information

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- Sudden Heart Failure

## Credits

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