



# DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE

## ADVICE FOR PATIENTS

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## WHAT DOES DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE MEAN?

Decompensated heart failure occurs when:

- The heart cannot pump blood hard enough to the organs in our body so they do not get enough oxygen and vital nutrients to function properly
- or
- the heart is very stiff
- or
- the heart valves are not working as they should
- Therefore, these situations can make it difficult to carry out activities that previously did not cost effort

## WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE?

Decompensated heart failure can have various causes. The most frequent causes are:

- heart attack
- cardiomyopathies determined by alterations of the genetic code
- inflammation of the heart muscle
- arterial hypertension (the "high blood pressure")
- heart valve disease
- Alcohol and drug abuse.

In a certain percentage of cases the cause is unknown and cannot be determined with ordinary investigations.



## HOW DOES DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE APPEAR?

Decompensated heart failure can appear with different ailments (symptoms), not always associated with physical effort.

### 1) FATIGUE and TIREDNESS

You may feel more tired than usual because your muscles are not getting enough oxygenated blood.

### 2) DIFFICULTY BREATHING (DYSPNEA)

It is a frequent symptom, which can appear during physical activity or at rest. You are sometimes out of breath during the night or while lying down, you need to use more pillows. Sometimes instead of shortness of breath there may be a dry, scratchy cough without phlegm. As your breathing becomes more and more difficult, your lips and nails tend to turn blue, your extremities feel cold, and you feel suffocated. **In these cases, call immediately the emergency number 112.**

### 3) EDEMA and WEIGHT INCREASE

The presence of swelling (edema) more frequently found in the lower limbs (legs, ankles) is due to excessive fluid retention. The edemas appear slowly during the day, when standing up, and subside with rest at night or when lying down with a pillow under the legs.

### 4) NEED TO URINATE MORE OFTEN AT NIGHT

In bed, while you sleep, some of the fluids you have accumulated in your body during the day go back into your blood vessels and from there to your kidneys, which produce more urine. For this reason, you may often get up to urinate.



## 5) HEART RHYTHM ALTERATION - VERTIGO EPISODES

The heart may sometimes beat faster or irregularly, sometimes causing dizziness, feeling faint or fainting.

In fact, all heart rhythm alterations, both rapid and slow, can worsen the symptoms of decompensated heart failure and reduce the amount of blood reaching the brain, sometimes leading to loss of consciousness.

The vertigo or dizziness that occurs when you change position or get up from a chair or bed, may be due to a drop in blood pressure. All these symptoms should be reported to your doctor.

## 6) LOSS OF APPETITE AND ABDOMINAL DISCOMFORT

You may feel "full" due to fluid retention in the organs of the digestive system, you may experience abdominal pain, nausea and poor appetite because the digestive system fails to work properly due to the low supply of oxygenated blood.

## 7) CHEST PAIN

In the case of cardiac ischemia (angina or infarction) which can be associated with decompensated heart failure, another symptom is a pain in the chest such as a bite, oppression, weight or burning, which can radiate to the throat, jaw or arms and which can be associated with difficulty breathing and/or cold sweat.

**If the pain does not go away with the medications you were advised in the hospital, call the emergency number 112.**



## SOME LIFESTYLE ADVICE

### SMOKING

If you are a smoker, now it is the time to take care of yourself. It is essential for your health to reduce the number of cigarettes, until you quit completely quickly.

Smoking is very harmful to your heart:

- it causes narrowing of blood vessels
- it increases heart rate and blood pressure
- the amount of oxygen carried in the blood decreases. The result is a greater strain on your heart and the risk of damaging it further.

Smoking also poses a danger to the lungs because:

- it contributes to the development of emphysema (the lung becomes less elastic and oxygenates the blood with more difficulty)
- it increases the chance of contracting lung infections
- it increases the risk of lung cancer.

If you are unable to quit smoking on your own, get help from friends, family and your doctor who can send you to an anti-smoking center.



### VACCINATIONS

Vaccinations are recommended to prevent the onset of respiratory infections that can aggravate the state of decompensation (anti-flu, anti-

pneumococcal).



## PERSONAL HYGIENE

Great attention must be paid to the care of personal hygiene, in particular it is important to brush your teeth regularly: heart failure in fact increases the risk of developing infections.



## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The type of physical activity you can perform will be agreed individually with your doctor and possibly the physiotherapist, on the basis of your clinical situation.



With a precise description of the symptoms, your doctor will be able to classify the degree of reduction of your daily physical activity:

**Class I:** no limitation. Normal, habitual activities and physical activity do

not cause symptoms.

**Class II:** mild or moderate limitation. Normal daily activities cause symptoms.

**Class III:** marked limitation. Well-being at rest, but appearance of symptoms when activities below normal daily activities are performed.

**Class IV:** severe limitation. Inability to perform any activity without ailments, symptoms present even at rest.

If your decompensated heart failure is mild, carry out normal work and leisure activities, carry out physical activity (walking, cycling on the plain, etc.) of course, always calmly and respecting the rhythms of your heart.

**If you feel tired**, have difficulty breathing, feel dizzy or sweaty, **stop immediately**.

**Don't make any effort after meals:** the cardio-circulatory system is already engaged in another activity (digestion)!

**Do not make sudden intense efforts**, such as lifting excessive weights.

Don't exert yourself in very hot or very cold weather. Don't make an effort when you are alone.

## **DRIVING VEHICLES**

If your decompensated heart failure is mild, you can use the car for short-medium journeys, always with the consent of your doctor.

However, try to avoid peak hours and the hottest hours to drive.

If your decompensated heart failure is moderate to severe, your doctor will advise you to rest: be a passenger and leave the stress of driving to others!

## **TRAVELS**

Your doctor should always be aware of the trips you intend to make, especially if by plane, at high altitude, abroad.

Short journeys by plane are generally less stressful than longer journeys by car, train or bus.

In any case, always carry all the medicines and your health documents with you.

## **SLEEP**

Decompensated heart failure can sometimes cause difficulty sleeping well at night.



Insomnia and shortness of breath at night can be a very important sign to report to your doctor.

In any case, we advise you to:

- Avoid going to bed immediately after dinner
- Avoid large evening meals
- Agree with the doctor the time to take the diuretics, in order to avoid spending the night between the bathroom and bed
- Use two or more pillows under the head to facilitate breathing
- Plan with your doctor the possible intake of sedative medicines, without taking them on your own initiative: they could in fact worsen your breathing and consequently your heart activity, without realizing it.



## **BODY WEIGHT**

### **Why is it important to weigh yourself?**

The weight should be measured every day or at least 2 times a week, possibly upon awakening, noting it in a diary to be taken to outpatient checkups.

To weigh yourself correctly you need to do it at the same time if possible, in the morning, on an empty stomach, with the same scale and the same clothes and after urinating.

Body weight normally increases because there is an imbalance between the amount of calories introduced with food and those consumed with physical activity.

If you are overweight, your doctor will advise you to lose weight to reduce the work done by your heart.

For this purpose, an interview with a dietitian may be useful, to agree on

a food program suitable for you, your lifestyle and possibly your tastes. However, you must also know that weight gain, especially if rapid (1 kg per day or more than 2-3 kg per week) is caused by the accumulation of fluids in the body tissues.

It occurs above all in the legs, but also in the rest of the body and manifests itself with the difficulty in wearing shoes, rings and belts that were fine up until a few days before.

When these signs are observed, it is important to notify your doctor immediately or to increase the dose of diuretic if it has already been prescribed for you.



## DIET

It is important to control your salt intake. In fact, salt is mainly composed of SODIUM and the excess of sodium helps to retain liquids in the body, worsening breathing and the appearance of edema. Furthermore, sodium is responsible for an increase in blood pressure.

Remember that the foods that contain the greatest amount of sodium (shown on the label) and therefore to be avoided or limited to the maximum are:

- cured ham-salami and cured meats in general
- smoked, freeze-dried foods, dried fruit
- aged cheeses, small cheeses
- canned products, french fries in bags, white pizza
- some mineral waters

To give more flavor to foods, use herbs and spices (for example lemon juice, garlic, onion, basil, rosemary, thyme, etc.). Prefer unprocessed foods with limited animal fat content. Also remember that it is better to avoid meals that are too large, especially if you have a habit of going to

bed after eating. Therefore, prefer small and frequent meals.



## THIRST

During some phases of the disease it is possible to feel an increase in the sense of thirst: in these moments it will be necessary to limit the ingestion of water and drinks as much as possible to avoid excessive accumulation of liquids. As a general rule, you shouldn't drink more than a liter of fluid per day. Remember that fruit, vegetables and soups still contain a lot of water and must be taken into account in the total amount of liquids taken. In case of thirst it is advisable to suck an ice cube, drink small quantities of water several times and not eat spicy or salty foods.

## MEDICINES

Always take all medicines as prescribed, do not stop taking medicines when you feel better, do not try to simplify the prescription by taking two doses in one, do not take other medicines (e.g. for colds, pains, etc.) without consulting your doctor, do not run out of medicines.



*[Oh yes! Those diuretics have given me a nice figure again!]*

## COMMONLY USED MEDICINES:

**Aspirin or antiplatelet agents:** to avoid the formation of thrombosis

**Anticoagulants:** to avoid the formation of clots

**ACE inhibitors:** to reduce the pressure and fatigue of the heart. They can also prevent the progression of the disease by helping your heart recover more contractile force over a few months.

**Diuretics:** to reduce excess fluids (both those you can see when your legs are swollen, and those you can't see, but manifest as feeling short of breath or swollen abdomen)

**Digitalis:** to improve the contractile strength of the heart and reduce heartbeats

**Beta-blockers:** to reduce heart work and heart rate. They can also prevent the progression of the disease by helping your heart recover more contractile force over a few months.

**Antiarrhythmics:** to prevent potentially dangerous heart rhythm abnormalities.

**BLOOD PRESSURE AND HEART RATE:** Check blood pressure and heart rate with the frequency that has been recommended to you and note them in a special diary. It is better to have a personal device to keep at home considering that there are easy-to-use devices for sale.



## DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE CLINIC:

Be on time for your appointments in the decompensated heart failure clinic.

**WHEN TO INFORM YOUR DOCTOR AND/OR THE DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE CLINIC:**

- Weight gain of 2-3 kg in a few days
- Swelling in the lower limbs and/or abdomen
- Inappetence and nausea
- Dizziness
- Severe feeling of tiredness
- Insistent dry cough
- Other symptoms

**WHEN TO CONTACT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE YOUR DOCTOR AND/OR THE DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE CLINIC:**

- Worsening difficulty in breathing and reduced tolerance to previously well tolerated efforts
- Significant difficulty breathing upon waking
- Need to sleep with more pillows so as not to feel difficulty breathing
- Appearance of cough at bedtime
- Elevated heart rate or irregular heartbeat

**WHEN TO CONTACT THE EMERGENCY NUMBER 112**

- Persistent chest pain or throat tightness that does not relieve with sublingual nitrates
- Severe or persistent difficulty breathing
- Fainting
- Too fast or too slow heartbeat associated with symptoms
- Sudden speech or vision impairment or sudden loss of strength in an arm or leg

*FOLLOW THE ADVICE OF DOCTORS,  
NURSES AND PHYSIOTHERAPISTS  
AND COLLABORATE WITH THEM TO GET  
THE BEST FROM THE TREATMENTS FOR  
DECOMPENSATED HEART FAILURE!!!*

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Revision 01 April 2022