**BRADFORD FAMILY MEDICINE – Education Information**

**Understanding Congestive Heart Failure (CHF)**

**What is Congestive Heart Failure?**

Congestive heart failure (CHF) is a condition where your heart cannot pump blood as well as it should. This causes blood to back up, leading to fluid buildup in your lungs, legs, or other parts of your body. CHF does not mean your heart has stopped, but it needs extra care to work better.

**Common Causes**

* High blood pressure
* Heart attack or heart disease
* Damaged heart valves
* Untreated sleep apnea
* Diabetes
* Kidney disease
* Certain medications or alcohol overuse

**Symptoms to Watch For**

* **Shortness of breath**, especially when lying down or during activity
* **Swelling** in your legs, ankles, feet, or abdomen
* **Feeling very tired** or weak
* **Weight gain** from fluid buildup (2-3 pounds in a day or 5 pounds in a week)
* **Coughing** or wheezing, especially at night
* **Fast or irregular heartbeat**

**Call your doctor or go to the emergency room right away** if symptoms worsen or you have chest pain, fainting, or severe shortness of breath.

**Managing CHF**

You can live well with CHF by making healthy changes and following your doctor’s advice. Here’s how:

**1. Take Your Medications**

* Take all prescribed medicines exactly as directed.
* Common CHF medications include diuretics (water pills), ACE inhibitors, beta-blockers, or others to help your heart and reduce fluid.
* Never stop or change medications without talking to your doctor.

**2. Monitor Your Weight**

* Weigh yourself every morning after using the bathroom, before eating or drinking.
* Use the same scale and write down your weight.
* **Alert your doctor** if you gain 2-3 pounds in one day or 5 pounds in one week.

**3. Follow a Heart-Healthy Diet**

* **Limit salt (sodium)** to 1,500–2,000 mg per day (about 1 teaspoon of salt). Avoid salty foods like chips, canned soups, or processed meats.
* Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.
* Ask your doctor about fluid limits (e.g., 8 cups per day).

**4. Stay Active**

* Ask your doctor about safe exercises, like walking or light stretching.
* Avoid overexertion—stop if you feel tired or short of breath.
* Cardiac rehabilitation programs may help you stay active safely.

**5. Avoid Harmful Habits**

* **Quit smoking**—ask your doctor for help or resources.
* Limit or avoid alcohol.
* Manage stress with relaxation techniques like deep breathing or meditation.

**6. Keep Up with Doctor Visits**

* Attend all follow-up appointments.
* Bring a list of your medications and any new symptoms.
* Get vaccinated for flu and pneumonia to protect your health.

**Warning Signs: When to Get Help**

**Call 911** if you experience:

* Severe chest pain
* Fainting or severe dizziness
* Sudden, severe shortness of breath

**Call your doctor** if you notice:

* Increased swelling or weight gain
* Worsening fatigue or shortness of breath
* Confusion or trouble thinking clearly

**Living Well with CHF**

* Keep a daily log of your weight, symptoms, and medications.
* Work with your healthcare team, including doctors, nurses, and dietitians.
* Ask family or friends for support with lifestyle changes.
* Stay positive—many people with CHF live active, fulfilling lives with proper care.

**Questions to Ask Your Doctor**

* What medications do I need, and what do they do?
* How much salt and fluid should I have each day?
* What exercises are safe for me?
* What symptoms should I watch for?

**Resources**

* American Heart Association: [www.heart.org](http://www.heart.org)
* National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute: [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)
* Contact your healthcare provider for local support groups or programs.

**Note:** This handout is for general information. Always follow your doctor’s specific instructions for your care.