

Best Drugs to Treat Heart Failure: The Right Medication Makes All the Difference

What is heart failure?

Heart failure occurs when your heart weakens and cannot pump blood well. Fluid builds up in your body. It usually gets worse over time.

Having high blood pressure, diabetes, or a heart attack can cause heart failure. You are more likely to have heart failure if you:

- Smoke.
- Are obese.
- Overuse alcohol or drugs.
- Are African-American or male.
- Are older in age.
- Have heart damage from chemotherapy.

Get a correct diagnosis early.

To diagnose heart failure, your doctor reviews your symptoms and risks. You may need an ultrasound, chest X-ray, or other tests.

Often, doctors do not find heart failure until it's serious. The symptoms are often mistaken for normal signs of aging or for asthma. Symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath during exercise
- Wheezing
- Coughing a lot (especially at night)
- Swollen ankles and neck veins
- Sudden weight gain

What can you do to manage heart failure?

There is no cure. But there are ways to relieve symptoms and live longer:

- Eat a healthy diet, exercise, quit smoking, and lose extra weight.
- Limit salt and liquids.
- Avoid alcohol.
- Get treatment for high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol.
- Avoid ibuprofen (Advil and generic) and naproxen (Aleve and generic).
- Avoid the diabetes drugs pioglitazone (Actos and generic) and rosiglitazone (Avandia).

How do doctors treat heart failure?

There are three main groups of drugs to treat heart failure. Usually, patients try them in this order:

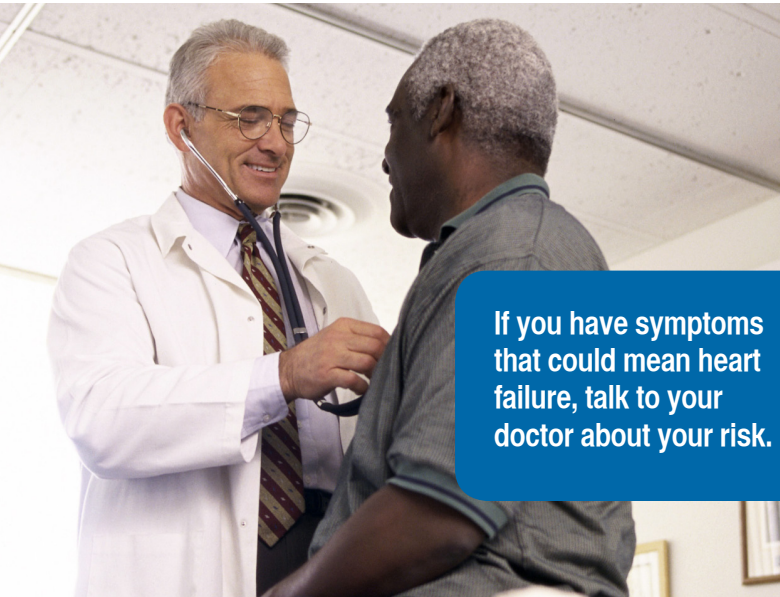
- Diuretics (water pills)
- ACE inhibitors
- Beta-blockers

Other drugs might be used, if needed. Many people take more than one drug. In severe cases, doctors may replace the heart, or parts of the heart.

Our advice:

Tell your doctor if you have any of these side effects:

- Some heart-failure drugs can cause low potassium levels, which can cause fatigue, muscle cramps, and weakness. You should get regular blood tests to check your levels.
- ACE inhibitors may cause a dry cough. If this bothers you, you may be given a different drug, called an angiotensin receptor blocker (ARB).
- Beta-blockers can cause fatigue, dizziness, low blood pressure, slow heartbeat, breathing problems, weight gain, numbness, depression, or tingling/coldness in the fingers, toes, or skin. It helps to start the drug with a low dose. It may also help to switch to another beta-blocker.



If you have symptoms that could mean heart failure, talk to your doctor about your risk.

Drugs to Treat Heart Failure: Benefits and Side Effects

Medication	Benefits	Side Effects and Notes
Diuretic Examples: Bumetanide (Bumex) and Furosemide (Lasix)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helps reduce fluid buildup in the body.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can cause low potassium levels, which can lead to fatigue, muscle cramps, and weakness. Your doctor should keep track of your potassium levels while you're taking this drug.
ACE inhibitor Examples: Captopril (Capoten & generic), Enalapril (Vasotec & generic), and Lisinopril (Prinivil, Zestril & generic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relaxes blood vessels, so blood can flow more easily.• Reduces premature death.• Can slow down heart failure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The most common side effect is an irritating dry cough. If this bothers you, the doctor will probably switch you to an angiotensin receptor blocker (ARB).• Can cause a rare but possibly life-threatening complication called angioedema—swelling of the face, tongue, lips, and throat. African-Americans have a higher risk for this.
Angiotensin receptor blocker (ARB) Examples: Candesartan (Atacand & generic), Losartan (Cozaar & generic), and Valsartan (Diovan & generic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Works like an ACE inhibitor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Used instead of an ACE inhibitor, especially when an ACEI is not well tolerated.
Beta-blocker Examples: Bisoprolol (Zebeta & generic), Carvedilol (Coreg & generic), and Metoprolol Succinate (Toprol XL & generic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Slows down heart rate.• Reduces premature death by about 30 percent and improves quality of life.• (Not a first-choice treatment.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People with heart failure have a high risk of complications with a beta-blocker. Therefore, a doctor, usually a cardiologist, must keep careful track of your treatment.
Hydralazine/isosorbide dinitrate (Bidil)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May increase survival and reduce hospitalizations in African-Americans with advanced heart failure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is not clear whether these drugs also reduce premature death in other ethnic groups.• Serious side effects include fainting, joint or muscle pain, fever, rapid heartbeat, chest pain, swollen ankles or feet, and numbing or tingling in hands and feet. Contact your doctor right away if you have any of these.
“Potassium-sparing” diuretics Examples: Spironolactone (Aldactone & generic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can help people with advanced heart failure. Eases symptoms by increasing urination and preventing fluid buildup.• (Not a first-choice treatment.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can increase blood-potassium levels, which can harm the heart. A doctor must carefully keep track of your levels.
Digoxin	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes the heart pump more strongly so it pumps more blood.• Reduces risk of hospitalization. It's not clear if it reduces the risk of death.• (Not a first-choice treatment.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Serious side effects include heart rhythm problems as well as upset stomach, vomiting, swelling of the feet or hands, unusual weight gain, and difficulty breathing. Your doctor should do regular blood tests.• Use caution when combined with beta-blockers.