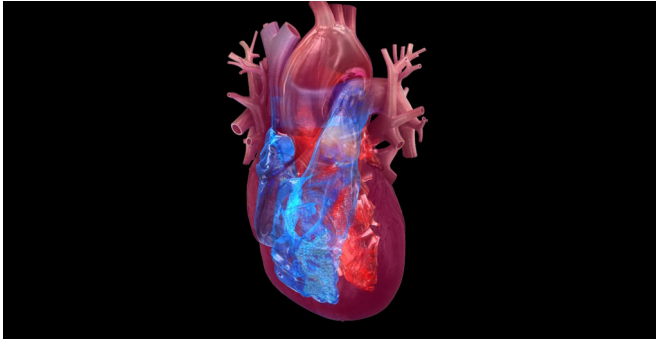


What is heart failure?

17 April 2018



Credit: American Heart Association

Heart failure – one of the conditions former first lady Barbara Bush has been diagnosed with – is a fairly common condition, especially among older patients.

About 6.5 million people in the United States have heart failure, which occurs when the heart becomes too weak to pump enough oxygen-rich blood to the body.

Heart failure can happen at any age but is more common in older people. Lifestyle factors such as smoking and excess weight can also increase the risk of heart failure, especially for those with underlying heart conditions such as [coronary artery disease](#), a history of [heart attack](#), [high blood pressure](#) or diabetes. Congenital heart defects that make the heart work harder can also lead to heart failure in children and adults.

The most common symptoms of heart failure include shortness of breath, fatigue and swelling in the ankles, feet, legs and abdomen – all the result of fluid building up in the body. This can worsen over time as the [heart muscle](#) continues to weaken. Such fluid buildup can also cause weight gain, frequent urination and a cough that worsens when lying down.

The condition can affect only one side, but often involve both sides of the heart.

Left-sided heart failure occurs when the heart's left ventricle, which provides most of its pumping power, is unable to pump enough oxygenated blood to circulate through the body. Often, the ventricle can't contract normally to maintain the force needed, or the muscle has become stiff and is unable to fill with blood when the heart rests between each beat.

Right-sided heart failure happens when the [right ventricle](#) can no longer adequately pump blood back into the lungs to be replenished with oxygen. This type of heart failure often occurs as a result of damage caused on the left side which then affects right side over time.

There is no cure for heart failure but there are many treatment options, including a combination of medications, lifestyle changes and medical devices. People with severe [heart failure](#) may need other medical procedures or surgery, such as a mechanical heart pump or heart transplant.

Provided by American Heart Association

APA citation: What is heart failure? (2018, April 17) retrieved 26 July 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-04-heart-failure.html>

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