

Patient information factsheet

Heart failure service

We have given you this factsheet because you have an appointment with the heart failure service. It explains what the heart failure service is and what to expect at your appointment. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of our team.

What is heart failure?

The term 'heart failure' can sound quite frightening when heard for the first time. However, heart failure does not mean that your heart has stopped working. It actually means that your heart is failing to work as well as it used to and has become less efficient at pumping blood around your body.

What is the heart failure service?

The heart failure service is a specialist team based at Southampton General Hospital made up of a number of heart failure nurses, heart failure cardiologists (heart doctors), a medical consultant, a palliative (end of life) care consultant, a pharmacist and two administrators.

We also have a team of experienced nurses who specialise in caring for people with heart failure.

What do we do?

Our specialist team is involved in caring for and supporting people living with heart failure in Southampton and South West Hampshire.

We will:

- assess and monitor your condition, and tailor all medication (including doses) and treatment to your individual needs
- assess whether you need more advanced interventions, such as specialised procedures or devices
- offer information, support and advice about your heart failure condition and treatment options to help you improve your knowledge of your condition, and your ability to manage it

We will work with other health care professionals in the hospital and your local community to provide high quality, individualised care for you and your family. The community heart failure nurses will also work very closely with your GP and the local primary care teams.

We are also involved with research into treatments aimed at improving heart failure and its management.

What causes heart failure?

There are many different reasons why heart failure occurs and it is not always possible to determine why it happens.

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The most common causes are:

- heart attacks
- high blood pressure

Less common causes are:

- diseases of the heart muscle (cardiomyopathy)
- heart valve problems
- viral infections
- high alcohol intake
- recreational drug use
- lung disease
- abnormal heart rhythms

What are the symptoms?

Heart failure can affect people in many ways and symptoms vary from person to person. Symptoms may start suddenly or develop gradually over weeks or months.

The most common symptoms are:

- shortness of breath
- feeling unusually tired or weak (fatigued)
- swelling of the ankles, lower legs or abdomen

How is heart failure treated?

For most people, heart failure is a long-term condition that often gets worse over time. It can't be cured, but with treatment and lifestyle changes, many people can have a good quality of life.

We will use a combination of medicines and healthy lifestyle changes to:

- improve your symptoms
- keep you as well as possible
- prevent your condition from getting worse

We will also help you to understand your condition and explain what the best possible treatment options are for you. Studies have shown that managing your care in this way will give you the best chance of having a good quality of life.

Some people may also benefit from other treatments, such as surgery or implanted devices. We will advise you on whether or not these treatments are appropriate for you.

Treatment will be specific to your needs. As your condition progresses, your needs and how you feel may change. For this reason, we will regularly review your condition and make any necessary adjustments to your treatment plan to help improve your quality of life.

What will happen during my appointment?

We will offer most people a telephone appointment or an appointment at a local clinic. If you are housebound or unwell, we can arrange to see you at home. During your appointment, we will carry out a number of assessments, including asking you about your symptoms and how they are affecting you. We will also check your blood pressure and your pulse, and we may examine your chest and check for signs of fluid retention. On some occasions, we may also carry out other tests, such as blood tests and additional scans of your heart. The aim of these tests is to check that the treatments and medications are tailored to your needs.

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We will need to start many of the medications at small doses and then gradually increase them. Even if you are feeling well, we may recommend adjusting your medications to best manage your condition. Each time we adjust your medications, you will need to have a blood test afterwards. We will usually perform these blood tests. However, if your GP or another specialist has requested a blood test, we cannot perform this without a form from the relevant doctor and confirmation of who will take responsibility for that result.

An important aspect of our role is to provide information, support and advice to you and your family. This includes information about your condition and how to manage it. We know from research and experience that this can help people and their families recognise symptoms that may suggest their condition is getting worse. This can help people feel more comfortable and confident about managing their condition. It can also help to reduce their chance of being admitted to hospital with heart failure symptoms.

Once we are satisfied that you are stable and on the best treatment to meet your needs, we will discharge you from our service back to your GP for future care. As heart failure symptoms can reoccur, we will provide you with some symptom management advice and contact details to get back in touch with our service before you are discharged.

We are very experienced in the management of heart failure. However, we are not a replacement for your GP. If we feel your symptoms are not related to heart failure, or if we have concerns about other aspects of your health, we will advise you to consult with your own doctor.

What advice and information will I be given?

We will provide you with information and advice specific to your individual needs. However, we will also provide you with some general information, including:

- what heart failure is and the common symptoms
- possible causes of heart failure
- treatment options for heart failure
- the benefits of stopping smoking
- eating and drinking requirements for people with heart failure
- keeping active within realistic limits (we can refer you to cardiac rehabilitation to help with this)
- taking medications as prescribed (we can help you with strategies to ensure you are less likely to miss or forget doses)
- keeping up to date with vaccinations for influenza and pneumonia
- how to check for signs of additional fluid in the body (this may involve weighing yourself every day)

End of life care

Over time, we may recommend making changes to your treatment plan, depending on your age, what is important to you, and any other health conditions you have. For people who are approaching the end of life, we may adjust the focus of treatment to make sure that they get the best possible care at that time. Some people find it very difficult to live with the uncertainty of having heart failure. Making decisions early on about how you would like to be cared for as you reach the end of your life will help you to feel more in control and may help to relieve any anxiety you have. We know that these types of discussions can be very challenging, even with family and close friends, but planning ahead can help you receive the care you want, and can also help to make things easier for your family when you are nearing the end of life.

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Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us.

Heart failure specialist nursing team
Heart failure unit
E level
East wing
Southampton General Hospital
Tremona Road
Southampton
SO16 6YD

Telephone: **023 8120 3140** (Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm)

If we're unable to answer your call immediately, please leave a brief message including your name, date of birth and telephone number and someone will return your call after 2pm. Please note that this service does not operate at the weekends or over bank holidays.

This number should **not** be used for medical emergencies. For life-threatening medical emergencies, such as cardiac chest pain, ring **999**, and for non-life threatening emergencies, ring **111**.

For advice about other (non-heart failure) medical matters that are not emergencies, contact your GP surgery.

Useful links

British Heart Foundation

Website: www.bhf.org.uk

ICD deactivation at the end life: Principles and practice:

www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/publications/living-with-a-heart-condition/icd-deactivation-at-the-end-life

Your guide to heart failure:

www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/publications/heart-conditions/your-guide-to-heart-failure

NHS

Website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-failure

Pumping Marvellous

Website: www.pumpingmarvellous.org

Atrial Fibrillation Association

Website: www.heartrhythmalliance.org/afa/uk

CRT / ICD / S-ICD patient information:

www.heartrhythmalliance.org/aa/uk/patient-booklets

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Deciding right

Website: www.northerncanceralliance.nhs.uk/deciding-right

Planning for your future care leaflet:

www.northerncanceralliance.nhs.uk/deciding-right/deciding-right-resources

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalneeds