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## TAKING STEPS TO LIVE WELL WITH HEART FAILURE

Together with your GP and healthcare team, you can take steps to help your heart condition so that you can live well and enjoy life more. The practical tips in this brochure will help you do more of the things that you enjoy.

Heart failure means that your heart is not pumping blood around your body as well as it used to. The symptoms can range from mild to severe. You might feel breathless and tired when doing daily activities or even while resting. Fluid build-up (oedema) can cause rapid weight gain, and your feet, legs and abdomen to swell.

Your GP and heart specialist (cardiologist) are there to guide you and help monitor your condition. Many other supports are also available to keep you well.

### What steps can I take?

- Follow your personalised care plan.
- Take your medicines as prescribed.
- Monitor how you feel each day and have a heart failure action plan so that you know when to seek medical assistance.
- Keep active.

## ✔ Talk to your GP about planning your care

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### **Developing a care plan in partnership with your GP, such as having a GP Management Plan, has been shown to improve the health of DVA patients with heart failure and help keep them out of hospital.**

With the help of your GP, nurse and pharmacist, a personalised plan outlines the treatments and services that suit you best. It gives you an opportunity to ask questions about your condition and put in place a heart failure action plan that documents what you need to do if your symptoms get worse. Your healthcare

team might include a pharmacist, nurse, dietitian, occupational therapist and exercise specialist. If you already have a care plan, ask your GP whether it is time to review it. **Some veterans with heart failure may be eligible to enrol in the Coordinated Veterans' Care (CVC) Program. Ask your GP to see if they offer this service and to determine your eligibility.**

*DVA pays for all Gold Card holders and some White Card holders to receive services from a range of healthcare providers as clinically required.*

## ✔ Take all of your heart failure medicines as prescribed

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Medicines for heart failure can make it easier for your heart to pump blood around your body, help you have more energy and feel better, and importantly, may help stop your heart failure worsening to the extent that you need to go to hospital.

- **Always take your medicines as prescribed.** Most people with heart failure need more than one medicine. Take them all as prescribed by your doctors and follow the instructions carefully. Your GP or heart specialist might change the dose of your medicines from time to time.
- **Always check with your GP or pharmacist before taking any medicines or supplements not prescribed by your doctors.** Such medicines or health related products could be those you buy from a supermarket, pharmacy, health food store or online. These include over-the-

counter cold and flu medicines and anti-inflammatory medicines for pain.

- **Ask your GP about having a DVA-funded Medicines Review.** It can be difficult to keep track of the many medicines you might need to take for your heart condition. A pharmacist can talk to you about your medicines and answer any of your questions, face-to-face in your home or via telehealth (a telephone or video consultation).
- **Keep an up-to-date list of your medicines that you can access easily.** Take it with you whenever you visit your GP, pharmacist and other healthcare team members. If you don't have a medicines list, ask your pharmacist for an up-to-date list or download the free MedicineWise app [www.nps.org.au/medicinewiseapp](http://www.nps.org.au/medicinewiseapp)
- **Ask your GP how often you need blood tests to monitor your medicines and your kidney function.**

## ✓ Do your daily checks

Do the following daily checks. As part of your management plan, your GP or nurse will outline what to do if you have changes in weight, signs of swelling or changes in your breathing, so that you know when to seek medical assistance.



### ➤ Monitor your weight

- Weigh yourself in the morning, after you have gone to the toilet but before eating breakfast.
- Use digital scales.
- Keep a daily written record of your weight. This will help you to compare your current weight with your usual target weight (your GP or nurse can help you work out your target weight).



### ➤ Look for signs of swelling

- Does the waistband on your pants, or do your socks, feel tight? Do you find it difficult to fit your shoes on? Do the rings on your fingers feel tighter?
- If you press firmly into your ankle, shin or knee with your finger, does it leave a dent in your skin?



### ➤ Look for changes in your breathing

- Are you using more pillows at night or having to sleep sitting upright to breathe more easily?
- Are you more short of breath than usual?
- Are you coughing more often or do you have a new cough?
- Are you finding it difficult to carry on a normal conversation without feeling breathless?

See the 'Living well with heart failure' brochure for a guide to living with heart failure [www.heartfoundation.org.au/Conditions/heart-failure](http://www.heartfoundation.org.au/Conditions/heart-failure) This includes a sheet to record your daily weight and other helpful information that you can take to all of your appointments.

**Contact your GP or nurse if you notice signs and symptoms of swelling, weight gain or increased breathlessness.**

**Call 000 for an ambulance immediately if you suddenly become short of breath, experience faintness or have chest pain.**

## ✓ What other steps can I take?

Keeping active and making healthy choices each day can help strengthen your heart, improve your mood and give you more energy.

### **Talk with your GP about the sort of exercises that are safe and suitable for you**

Your GP might recommend a specialised heart failure management program to get you exercising safely. This is also a great way to meet other people in a similar situation.

### **Ask your GP or nurse about how much fluid you can have each day**

Once you know, keep to that amount. Just as having too much fluid can result in fluid build-up, not having enough fluid can lead to dehydration and dizziness.

### **Eat less salty food**

Try to eat less than 1 level teaspoon of salt (2,000 mg) per day. This may be listed as sodium on packaging labels. Salt is hidden in many processed foods. Ask your GP about a referral to a dietitian if you would like advice.

### **Limit your alcohol intake and take steps to quit smoking**

 Making lifestyle changes such as limiting alcohol intake and quitting smoking can improve your heart

health. Talk with your GP about whether drinking alcohol will worsen your heart condition. Talk to your GP or pharmacist about the options for quitting smoking or call Quitline on 13 78 48.

### **Ask your GP about a flu and pneumococcal vaccine**

Flu or pneumonia can be very serious if you have heart failure. Have a flu vaccine every year (usually in March or April) and ask your GP whether you are due for a pneumococcal vaccine.

### **Talk to your GP if you need extra support**

If you are finding it difficult to manage daily tasks at home, ask your GP about arranging for extra support. Many DVA services are available to help you live safely and independently at home.

If you are feeling sad or worried or finding it difficult to cope, talk to your GP or nurse or contact Open Arms – Veterans and Families Counselling available 24/7 on 1800 011 046, or at: [www.openarms.gov.au](http://www.openarms.gov.au)

**Talk to your GP if you have other concerns about your heart failure and COVID-19. See Veterans' MATES Keeping well during COVID-19 at: [www.veteransmates.net.au/topic-59](http://www.veteransmates.net.au/topic-59)**