

Monday, February 20, 2006

Heart failure must be managed

Five million Americans are living with heart failure, and another 550,000 new cases are diagnosed each year. Yet as common as heart failure is, it is not widely understood and misconceptions abound.

Heart failure is not a sudden, dramatic, acute condition (like a heart attack), but a chronic illness (like diabetes) that must be managed over time.

Dr. Ron Oren, director of Mercy's new Heart Failure Program, says heart failure also is a challenging illness.

"Patients just don't feel well and can't do things they used to," he says. "It's unpredictable. It can be hard for the individual and for the family to plan or adapt."

Heart failure occurs when the fist-sized muscle of the heart weakens and its pumping ability falters. Sometimes the heart enlarges or the muscle stiffens. As blood flow becomes sluggish, fluid may build up in the body and seep into the lungs. This leads to the most common symptoms of fatigue, shortness of breath and swelling, especially in the legs and feet. Simple activities can be taxing, and sleep can be difficult.

The causes vary. Sometimes heart failure develops after a heart attack. Sometimes it is brought on by chronic high blood pressure, or it can occur after a virus attacks the heart muscle. In some cases the cause is unknown.

Oren says heart failure is widely viewed as terminal, with no improvement possible. On the contrary, he says, "With proper treatment some individuals improve and live well for years."



Denice Connell

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Oren says there are three basic approaches to treatment:

- Pharmacologic -- that is, treating the condition with medications. Some medications can strengthen the heart's beat, others help rid the body of excess fluid, and still others dilate the blood vessels.
- Non-pharmacologic -- referring to a range of daily self-care strategies. Education and support are vital.
- Device therapy. Depending on the patient's condition and the cause of the heart failure, technology may help. An implantable pacemaker to maintain the heart's rhythm and efficiency is right for some patients.
- Ultrafiltration -- a high-tech approach that removes excess fluid from the body -- may help others.

Progress is being made in each of these areas, Oren says. What's more, he emphasizes a team approach with heart failure patients. Mercy's multidisciplinary program includes physicians, nurses, dietitians, physical therapists, social workers and counselors, each with special expertise to contribute not only to the patient but the whole family.

Want to learn more? Oren will be available online to answer your questions about heart failure from 7 to 8 p.m. Tuesday. To take part in this online chat, visit Mercy's Web site, www.mercyiowacity.org, and follow the links provided.

- Next month: Self-care is critical for people living with heart failure. Hear from the heart failure program nurses who work closely with patients.

Denice Connell writes about health issues for Mercy Hospital in Iowa City. Her column on men's and women's health will appear the third Monday of the month. Contact her by calling 339-3676 or e-mail denice.connell@mercyic.org.

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