

Living well with heart failure

Information to help you feel better



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the heart failure team and patients at Eastern Health and St Vincent's Health in Victoria.

This publication is a 2023 adaptation of an existing 'Living well with heart failure' resource. It was originally adapted from the Heart Foundation's resource 'Living every day with my heart failure' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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This book is your guide to living with heart failure. It will help you and your family look after your heart. Your nurse, doctor or health worker (care team) can help you fill out this book. You may want a friend or family member to be with you.

Name:

I started this book on:

My nurse is:

Phone:

My health worker is:

Phone:

My family doctor (GP) is:

Phone:

My heart doctor (cardiologist) is:

Phone:

My clinic is: Phone:

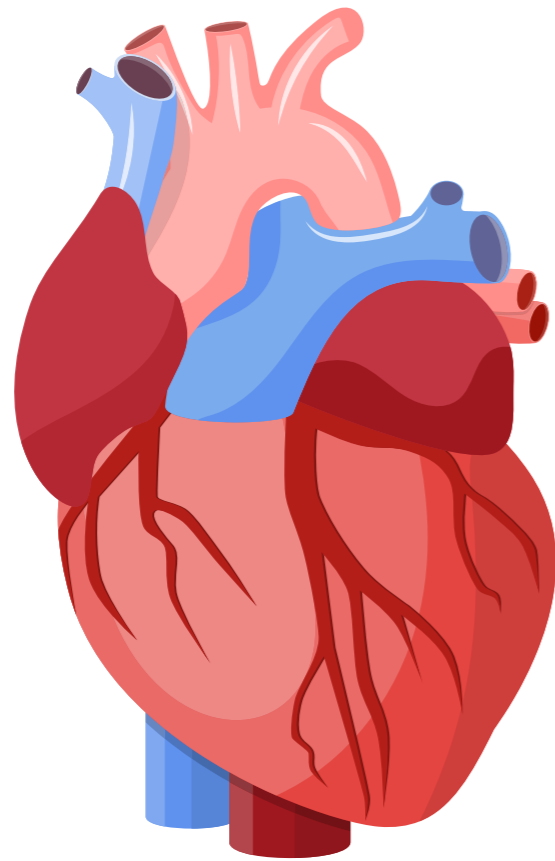
My pharmacist is: Phone:

Family and community helpers:
Name: Phone:

Name: Phone:

Name: Phone:

Many people do not just have heart failure. They may also have diabetes, kidney disease, lung problems, high blood pressure or other sicknesses. All of these sicknesses affect each other and can be managed together.



Your heart is a muscle that pumps blood to every part of your body. When you have heart failure, your heart muscle can become bigger, weaker, or stiffer, and doesn't pump as well as it should.

Learning about heart failure and working with your team of health professionals can help you feel better and do more of the things that are important to you.

Contents

About this book

This book is colour coded to help you easily find information that can help you manage your heart failure.

If you cannot understand something in this book, please talk to your nurse, doctor or health worker. They are there to help you.

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What is heart failure?

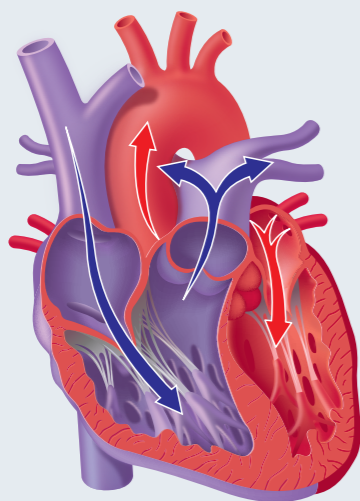
Heart failure is when your heart gets damaged, becomes bigger, weaker, or stiffer, so doesn't pump as well as it should. This causes extra fluid to build up in your body and sometimes in your lungs. Lots of things can damage your heart including:

- Heart attack
- High blood pressure
- Too much fat in your blood (high cholesterol)
- Too much alcohol
- Too much sugar in your blood (diabetes)
- Infections (virus)
- Something you are born with
- Some medicines (e.g. cancer therapies).

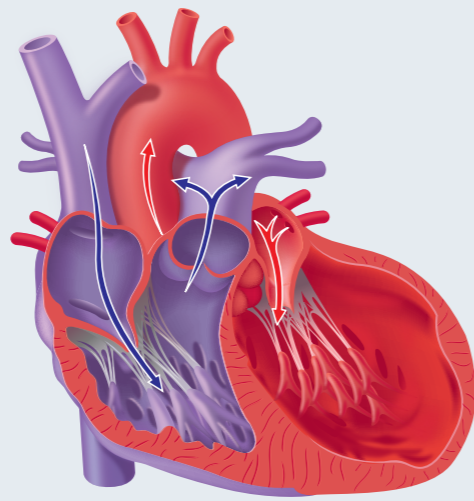
Heart failure is a serious problem and help from your health professional is important. They can give you advice on things like medications, diet and exercise to make it easier to do things that are important to you. You can't always make the heart strong like it used to be, but you can help it to work better.

Example of a heart with heart failure

Normal heart



Heart with heart failure



- Heart is bigger and/or out of shape
- Heart chambers are weak
- Doesn't beat/pump properly
- Blood stays in the heart longer
- Heart might beat faster
- Less blood is pumped in and out of the heart

How does your heart failure make you feel?

Here is a list of some of the most common symptoms you may experience with heart failure, and some ideas you can try to help ease them as well as taking your medications regularly as directed. It is vital that if you are having trouble managing, or your symptoms change, that you contact a health professional to discuss it.



Shortness of breath or trouble breathing

- Find a comfortable position – this could be sitting or leaning forwards.
- Try to relax and take slow, deep breaths from your tummy.
- Go outside/open a window to get fresh air.
- See the 'Shortness of breath' section (page 8).



Coughing

- Take your fluid tablets.
- Suck on a lozenge.



Heart pounding or going too fast (palpitations)

- Stop what you are doing and rest.
- Avoid stimulants (such as coffee and energy drinks).



Feeling tired or lethargic

- Be physically active each day to help your heart get stronger. See the 'Physical activity' section (page 15).
- Pace yourself across the day and take rests when you need to.
- Make sure you get enough sleep.
- Ask for help if you need it.



Swollen ankles, legs or stomach

- Make sure you aren't having too much fluid or salt (see pages 9 and 12).
- Stay as active as possible (see page 15).
- Sit/lie down with legs raised.
- Take your fluid tablets.



Pain in your chest

- Stop what you are doing and rest.
- Take your anginine or nitrolingual spray.
- If the chest pain is really bad or gets worse, call Triple Zero (000) and ask for an ambulance. **This is an emergency.**
- See the section 'Warning signs of heart attack' (page 21).



Feeling dizzy

- Stop and rest – sit down if you are standing.
- Stand up slowly when you have been sitting or lying down.



Lack of hunger/nausea

- Eat smaller meals more often.
- Have salt-free or salt-reduced snacks during the day.
- Eat foods you like and enjoy.



Feeling sad or worried

- Talk to someone about how you are feeling – don't keep it to yourself (see page 14).
- Have a hobby that you enjoy.
- Speak to your health professional about what resources they can offer.



Not going to the toilet often enough (constipation)

- Be physically active and move around more during the day.
- Drink fluids but no more than your doctor has recommended.
- Eat more fruit and vegetables.

Shortness of breath

In heart failure, being short of breath is often the first thing you notice. It is caused by fluid in the lungs. This can be particularly noticeable when you are lying down flat. Coughing and waking up at night can be a result of fluid on your lungs.

When it gets really bad, you may need to sit up to sleep. You must go to see your health professional within 24 hours if you have to use extra pillows or sit up at night to sleep.

Breathlessness checklist

Sleep

- Do you need to sit up higher to sleep? Yes No
- Do you sleep all night? Yes No
- Can you lie flat to sleep? Yes No
- Does shortness of breath or coughing wake you up? Yes No

Walking

- Can you walk as far as normal? Yes No
- Do you get short of breath when you walk? Yes No
- When I feel well, I can walk to:
- When I feel sick, I can only walk to:
- When I get short of breath, I can't do things like:

Important 'Take Action' signs are:

- Can't lie down to sleep
- Need to sit up more at night using extra pillows
- More breathless
- New cough
- Chest pain
- Not able to walk short distances
- Other (as you may have been told by your nurse or doctor):



Fluid

When you have heart failure fluid can build up in your body. This can make you weigh more or make your ankles, legs or other parts of your body swell up. It is important to know when fluid in your body is building up so you can do something early. The easiest way to do this is to weigh yourself every day and look for changes. Some tips for weighing yourself to monitor fluid are:

- Use a diary or calendar to help you remember the numbers and easily see any changes.
- Weigh yourself in the morning after you go to the toilet, but before you get dressed and eat breakfast.
- Know what your 'good' or 'healthy' weight is.
- Take notice of how your clothes feel – this might change even if the scale doesn't.



Contact your health professional if:

- You put on weight quickly – more than 2 kg in two days.
- Your clothes (belt, socks, pants) get tight.
- You notice swelling in your ankles, stomach or legs.
- You lose your appetite.

Managing fluid

You need to know how much fluid you can safely have – to find this out, speak with your health professional. It will probably be about 1–1½ litres a day but will differ for everybody depending on their own body and circumstances. It is vital that you stick to your daily allowance, and measure how much fluid you are having.

The amount of fluid I can have in a day

To keep track of your fluid intake, you can use a calendar or diary. A fluid plan like the one on page 11 is also useful for tracking fluids. Some things to remember:

- Record all your fluids – even the water you use to take your medicines with.
- Avoid foods with high salt as these will make you thirstier.
- Avoid adding table salt during cooking and eating.
- Some foods also count as fluid – see page 10 for examples!
- Limit alcohol and things with caffeine (cola or coffee) as these can affect your heart – but if you do drink them, make sure to record them in your fluid total.
- If you get thirsty, you can chew sugarless gum or try sucking on frozen fluids (such as ice).

How do I measure fluid?

It is useful to keep a measuring jug or cups handy, so you can accurately see how much fluid is in liquids. Drinks that come in cans or bottles will also have the volume written on the packaging. Some foods will also count towards your fluid total though – things like soup, ice cream, jelly, yoghurt, pasta and watery fruit like melons. Also – remember to include ice cubes in your fluid count!

Refer to the table below for the fluid content of some food and drinks.

Fluid content of some common foods and drinks



Cup of tea or coffee
250 mL



½ cup jelly or custard
125 mL



200 g tub yoghurt
160 mL



2 scoops of ice cream
30 mL



1 cup cooked porridge
160 mL



1 cup cooked rice or pasta
100 mL



1 piece of fruit (apple)
80 mL



½ cup melon
100 mL



2 tablespoons gravy/sauce
40 mL



1 cup of soup
250 mL



1 ice cube
15 mL

My fluid plan

Time	What I can have	How much I can have
Breakfast 		
Morning tea 		
Lunch 		
Afternoon tea 		
Dinner 		
Bedtime 		
Daily total		mL

Salt

Salt and sodium are often used interchangeably. Sodium is a mineral, and salt combines two minerals, sodium and chloride. Sodium holds fluid in your body which can lead to swelling and breathlessness.

The Heart Foundation recommends reducing salt intake to less than 5 grams a day (approximately one teaspoon). This is for everyone, not just people living with heart failure!

Sodium is found naturally in small amounts in some whole foods. It is also added as salt during food preparation or to packaged foods to enhance flavour, texture, or extend shelf life. About three-quarters of the salt we eat comes from processed foods.

Some salty, high sodium foods to look out for include:

- Processed meat such as ham, bacon, sausages, hot dogs, tinned meat, corned meat and pies.
- Processed foods such as hamburgers, pizza, hot chips, noodles, tinned and instant soup, potato chips, pasta and fried food.
- Sauces, seasonings and condiments such as packet seasoning, stock cubes, soy sauce, tomato sauce, pickles, olives and dips.
- Drinks such as sports drinks and soda water.
- Some bread and breakfast cereals can contain a lot of salt, so be careful which one you choose.

How to read a food label

1. Look at the nutrients per 100 g.
2. Look at sodium.
3. Choose foods with lower sodium. Less than 400 mg per 100 g is good. Less than 120 mg per 100 g is best.

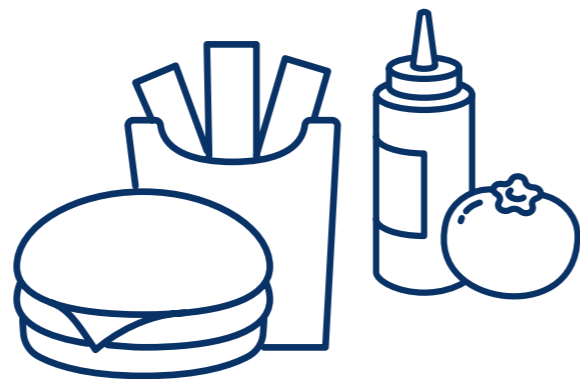
This food has 70 mg of sodium per 100 g. This means that this food is low in salt and so a good choice. You should have no more than 5 grams of salt (2,000 mg sodium) per day, which is about one teaspoon.

Nutrition information

Servings per package: 8

Serving size: 33g

	Per Serving	Per 100g
Energy	550kj	1680kJ
Protein	2.4g	7.2g
Fat		
Total	3.6g	11.0g
Saturated	1.3g	4.1g
Carbohydrate		
Total	21.5g	55.1g
Sugars	10.1g	30.7g
Dietary Fibre	1.7g	5.1g
Sodium	20mg	70mg



How can I eat less salt?

Eating less than 5 grams of salt a day can be achieved by adopting the Heart Foundation's Heart Healthy Eating Pattern, making healthy choices of minimally processed foods and selecting packaged foods that are low in sodium.

A Heart Healthy Eating Pattern includes:



1 Plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrains.



2 Healthy proteins especially fish, seafood, legumes, nuts and seeds with smaller amounts of eggs and lean poultry. Limit lean red meat to 1-3 times a week.



3 Unflavoured milk, yoghurt and cheese. Those with high blood cholesterol should choose reduced fat varieties.



4 Healthy fat choices with nuts, seeds, avocados, olives and their oils for cooking.



5 Herbs and spices to flavour foods, instead of adding salt.

The Heart Foundation has lots of great recipes that are low in salt and heart healthy! Remember to take into account any fluid that is contained if your health professional has asked you to track fluids (see page 9).

Find our recipes at hrt.how/recipes

Relationships and sex

After a heart attack, your relationships and sex life may change. It can be uncomfortable or embarrassing to talk about but remember that most concerns can be overcome. Be patient with yourself. Some things to keep in mind:

- Sex is usually a mild to moderate activity. So, if you can climb two flights of stairs without pain, discomfort or shortness of breath, then you are ok to be sexually active.
- If you've had surgery, wait until you're healed (usually 6–8 weeks). Don't put any pressure or weight on your chest.
- Avoid sex after eating a large meal, drinking alcohol or when you're tired.
- If you aren't ready for sex, there are other ways to feel connected. Kissing, cuddling, holding hands and just spending time together will make you feel close and loved.
- Some heart medications can affect your sex life by reducing your desire for sex or causing physical changes that make sex uncomfortable.
- The best thing you can do is talk about how you're feeling. It might be hard, but it lets people know how they can help. Some couples find it easier to talk with a relationship counsellor.



Mental health

If you have been diagnosed with heart failure, you may be overwhelmed with emotions. Experiencing moments of sadness, grief, confusion or lack of hope after a diagnosis – a temporary 'emotional roller-coaster' – are a normal response to a stressful event.

Depression is different. Depression is when you feel down or miserable most of the time. It affects everything, including your normal activities. It may interfere with the successful management of your heart condition.

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. It often comes with strong physical feelings, like a racing heart, feeling sick, or getting very hot then very cold. You might have bad or scary thoughts at the same time. Lots of people with anxiety stay home and avoid others. Unfortunately, this just makes things worse.

What can I do?

- Find someone to talk to. It could be someone in your healthcare team, a family member, or a friend.
- Keep active and maintain your connection with family and friends. Joining a walking group is a great way to do this (see pg 16)!
- Meet with other people who've been through this – a great reason to join a cardiac rehab or support group.
- Find a hobby that you enjoy – gardening or painting are examples of activities that people find relaxing and meditative.
- Ask your doctor about seeing a psychologist or whether medication might be appropriate.

Don't wait to get help. The sooner you speak to someone in your health care team, the sooner they can help you on your way to feeling better.



Physical activity

Regular physical activity will help your heart get stronger and make you less tired. Before you start, talk to your health professional about a physical activity plan to suit you. There are lots of ways to be active.

Move more, sit less

Walking is a good way to be active. When you walk, you should be breathing slightly faster but still able to talk.

The Heart Foundation has free walking groups and online Personal Walking Plans that can help you get active and stay active! Find them at walking.heartfoundation.org.au

Strength exercises are also important for keeping you healthy and to keep your muscles and body strong. Personal Walking Plans also include strength and stretching exercises as part of your plan.

You can also use items around the house such as picking up the laundry or using tinned cans of food as hand weights to help keep you strong.



Doing regular strength exercises across the week can also help you manage fatigue. Having a regular plan can help you to manage your physical health. Remember to pace yourself, which includes planning rest days and different activities to do across the week.

Keeping up with regular exercise can also help you track changes in your health. If you can usually walk to a friend's house easily but are now becoming breathless on the walk, it is time to talk to your health professional.

Easy ways to keep active

It is important to be as active as you can across the day. Try and reduce the amount of time you spend sitting, and break sitting times by getting up and moving around. For example, get up and walk to the kitchen if you have been sitting for more than 30 to 60 minutes. Every little bit counts.

There are other ways to keep your daily activity up. These include:

- Mowing the lawns or gardening.
- Hanging out the washing.
- Packing away groceries.
- Walking around a shopping centre.
- Taking your dog to the park.
- Taking the train or bus instead of the car.
- Park the car further away and walk to your destination (even if it's a spot at the back of the shopping centre car park).
- Playing with your kids/grandkids.
- Using an exercise bike – a great way to keep moving when it is too cold or hot to go outside.

Exercising is easy – even if you haven't done it in the past. Start by making a plan with your health professional. You can start slowly and do a little bit more each time. You will notice that as you become fitter it becomes easier. To stay motivated, consider recording your activity and rating how much effort different activities take, see page 23 for your activity record.

Don't overdo it though! It is important that you pace yourself as you re-commence or start a new activity. Don't try to strain with heavy weights, start running or walking long distances if you haven't done it before. Avoid exercising in extreme temperatures such as when it is very hot or cold. This can make you feel sick and put too much strain on your heart. Also avoid exercise or activities that are too hard, or make you feel very out of breath, feel tired or make you feel sick. Stop exercising if you get pain in your chest or it gets hard to breathe and talk to your health professional about how to be as active as you can while managing your heart failure.

There's a simple way to reduce stress, be more alert, and build a healthier body and stronger relationships. It's walking.

Visit walking.heartfoundation.org.au to join a free walking group or to sign up for a free Personal Walking Plan. Our Personal Walking Plans will help you be more active, healthier and happier in just six weeks.

This initiative is supported by the Australian Government.




Walk towards a healthier heart
with Australia's largest free walking program



Heart Foundation Walking encourages people to walk more and offers support, ongoing information and advice about how to keep active.

Scan the code below to find out more.



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Medicines

It is very important to take your medicines as prescribed

Your doctor may give you a lot of different medicines to take for your heart failure. It can be confusing, but it is important that you keep track of them and take them as prescribed. Medicines do not cure heart failure, but they can help you feel better, live longer, stay out of hospital and have more energy so you can enjoy life. Each medicine works in a different way to help your heart. Medicines for heart failure belong to the groups described on the next page. Some key things to remember with your medicines:

- Take all of your medicines every day.
- Don't share or take other people's medicines, because they might not be right for you.
- Don't run out of medicine – make sure you have enough medicine to last if you are going away.
- Some medicines don't mix well together – don't start any new medicines from the chemist or supermarket before you speak to your health professional. This includes vitamins and natural/herbal supplements.
- Keep an up-to-date list of what you are taking, how much, and when (page 26).

The amount (dose) or type of medicine you need for your heart may change. Medicines for heart failure are often started at a low dose and then the doctor will adjust them to suit you, depending on how you feel and how you are recovering. It is important to understand and keep track of these changes. If you aren't sure, ask your health professional to write down their instructions for you.

Lots of pharmacies now offer services to help you manage your medications, such as blister packs with your correct dosage per day

Most people have no problems with their medicines but sometimes medicines can make you feel dizzy or light-headed, feel worse, make you itchy or give you a rash, or make you cough. If you are experiencing any side effects, make a note of what you are feeling, and at what time/after which medication so you can speak to your health professional about it. This will help them adjust the medication to suit you. Don't try to adjust it yourself.

Some medicines or supplements are bad for your heart when you have heart failure. Always check with your health professional before you take anti-inflammatory pain medicines e.g. ibuprofen, cough or cold and flu medicines, herbal or vitamin products or supplements, and weight loss products or supplements.



How do my medicines work?

- **Angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitors (ACEI), angiotensin receptor blockers (ARB) or angiotensin receptor-neprilysin inhibitors (ARNI)** help blood vessels to relax and make it easier for your heart to pump and reduce fluid build-up in your body. I take:

- **Beta blockers** help your heart work better by pumping slower and stronger. I take:

- **Aldosterone blockers** (mineralocorticoid receptor blockers) help to get rid of extra fluid from your body and make it easier for your heart to work as it should. I take:

- **Sodium-glucose cotransporter-2 inhibitors (SGLT2i)** help control your blood pressure and blood volume. I take:

- **Diuretics** help you pass fluid, preventing build-up. I take:

- **Other heart failure medicines** I take:

- **Other medicines or supplements** I take:

It is very important that you take all your heart failure medicines and follow the instructions carefully. Do not stop taking your heart failure medicines without discussing with your doctor. Carry an up-to-date medicines list with you.

Things you can do to feel better

Here is a list of things you can do to make sure you are living well with heart failure:



Don't have too much fluid and salt

- Know how much fluid you can have each day.
- Don't eat too much salt (don't forget the salt that is hidden in some foods).



Drink less alcohol and quit smoking

- Alcohol can cause more damage to your heart. If you drink alcohol, talk to your health professional about how to cut it down.
- For many people, not drinking at all is the safest option.
- Don't smoke or be around people who smoke. Talk to your health professional if you need help quitting.
- Vaping (or smoking e-cigarettes) is also dangerous for your heart. Avoid vaping, or being around people who vape.



Manage your weight

- Weigh yourself every morning.
- Ask your health professional whether you need to lose weight.



Follow a heart-healthy eating pattern

- This style of eating is naturally low in sodium, saturated and trans fats, and added sugar and rich in unsaturated fats, wholegrains, fibre, and antioxidants.
- Check out the Heart Foundation's heart-healthy recipes at hrt.how/recipes



Keep active

- Do some physical activity every day.
- Make a plan to include regular walks and strength exercises to keep you strong.



Immunisation

- Have a flu vaccine every year.
- Talk to your health professional about keeping your pneumococcal and COVID-19 vaccines up to date.



Medicines

- Take your medicines as prescribed.
- If you have a problem with your medicine, talk to your health professional.



Stay connected

- Keep your health appointments.
- Talk to your family and friends about your heart failure, and how you are feeling.
- Ask for help if you need it!
- Call your doctor, nurse or health worker when you don't feel well.
- Ask your health professional about attending cardiac rehab or a heart failure management program.

Cardiac rehabilitation

Cardiac rehabilitation (cardiac rehab) is a program of support, exercise and education that's led by health professionals and personalised to help strengthen your heart. It can help you to make long-term lifestyle changes so you can live a longer, healthier life. Physical activity is good for everyone and in these programs, staff can support and guide you to build up your confidence and also give you tips for healthy eating and taking your medicines.

It can help your recovery after your heart event, helps you to manage your heart condition, and also lowers your chance of having a heart attack in the future.

Cardiac rehab is proven to keep you out of hospital and reduce your risk of death from heart conditions.

Cardiac rehab usually starts in hospital, but continues after you've left, either at home or in another location, such as a community centre. It often runs for 4 to 10 weeks, depending on your program and your health condition.

You will meet other people with heart conditions, including heart failure and can share ideas and support each other.

There are programs in all states and territories in Australia, find your nearest here hrt.how/qv5 or speak to your health professional to find out what services are available to you.



Warning signs of a heart attack

Pain, pressure or tightness in one or more of these areas:



Chest



Arm/s



Shoulder/s or Back



Neck or Jaw



You may also feel:



Short of breath



Dizzy



Sweaty



Sick

Tell someone how you feel. If feeling worse or not better after 10 minutes,

Call Triple Zero (000)

Take 300 mg aspirin, unless you have an allergy to aspirin, or your doctor has told you not to take it.

Measuring your intensity

Understanding your level of effort can help you figure out the level of physical activity and movement achievable for you. The numbers on this scale indicate different levels of intensity, from low through to extreme.

Aim for no greater than a moderate level of activity (4–5 out of 10).

Rate of perceived exertion (RPE)

Level of effort out of 10

1 Very light activity (anything other than complete rest)	2-3 Light activity (feels like you can maintain for hours, easy to breath and carry on a conversation)	4-5 Moderate activity (feels like you can exercise for long periods of time, able to talk and hold short conversations)	6-7 Vigorous activity (on the verge of becoming uncomfortable, short of breath, can speak a sentence)	8-9 Very hard activity (difficult to maintain exercise intensity, hard to speak more than a single word)	10 Max effort (feels impossible to continue, completely out of breath, unable to talk)
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My activity record

Date	Activity	Time spent (min)	Level of effort (RPE)





My health record

Date	Weight (kg)	Waist (cm)	Blood pressure	HbA1c

My clinic and doctor visits

Date/time	Where	With

My medicines

Time	Medicine type	Brand name
 Morning		
 Noon		
 Evening		
 Bedtime		
When needed		

Dose/strength	How do I take it?	What is it for?

Call your health professional

Call your doctor, nurse or health worker within 24 hours if you have any of these symptoms:



- Your ankles, legs or stomach are swelling.



- Your shoes, socks or pants are getting very tight.



- Weight goes up or down by 2 kg or more in two days.



- Bad cough, especially at night.



- A new cough that won't go away.



- Your breathing is getting harder.



- You can only walk or move less than usual.



- You have to sit up to sleep.



- You feel dizzy or feel like fainting.



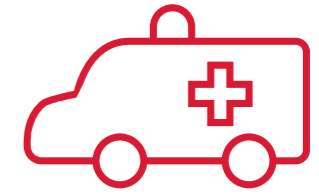
- Heart is racing and won't slow down (palpitations).



- You feel more sick than usual or have developed new symptoms.

Emergency – call 000

Call Triple Zero (000) and ask for an ambulance if you have any of these warning signs of heart attack:



Pain, pressure, heaviness or tightness in your:



chest



arm(s)



back



neck



jaw



shoulder(s)



You collapse or black out



It is very hard to breathe or you can't breathe

Notes

Notes



For heart health information
visit heartfoundation.org.au

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