



## **Managing Your Chronic Illness: Information for Patients**

Active involvement in your own care is critical. You need to understand your condition well enough to take responsibility for the management of your health. You can and should be involved in decisions about your treatment.

Traditionally, the doctor's role has been to diagnose and prescribe, while the patient's role has been to comply with the doctor's orders. This approach may still work for acute problems, but is far less effective in dealing with a chronic disease. Effective management of a chronic disease requires a partnership between you and your doctor.

Your doctor's role in this partnership is to provide medical advice, offer treatment options and recommend resources.

Your role is to monitor your symptoms, report them accurately, and manage the disease on a day-to-day basis.

### **The Disease Management Program**

The Disease Management Program is a service offered by your employer and provided by your insurance company at no out of pocket cost to you! A team of dedicated nurses provide education and support to you if you decide to enroll in the program. In the program, participants get new information, learn new skills and abilities, and develop new ways to manage and cope with their chronic condition. Participants receive support from the nurses to help improve their condition while making lifestyle choices which will have great affects on your health.

The Disease Management nurse teaches skills in the following areas:

- developing a suitable exercise program
- education on symptom management
- nutrition management
- breathing exercises
- problem solving
- use of medication
- communicating with family, friends and health care providers
- dealing with emotions such as anger and depression



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## **Asthma: Information for Patients**

Your Disease Manager will teach you about this disease, give you educational material and inform you of different web sites that may help you learn more about this illness. You will learn how to manage your asthma.

### **What is Asthma?**

Asthma is a chronic (long term) disease of the airways. It is characterized by reversible airflow obstruction (tightening of the smooth muscles around the airways), inflammation (swelling) and mucus production when airways are exposed to various stimuli (triggers).

Asthma has no cure but there are effective medications to control symptoms and prevent asthma attacks. Asthma can be life-threatening, requiring emergency room care or hospital admission. However, with proper care, including medication, monitoring your symptoms, and leading a healthy lifestyle, you should be able to control your symptoms and improve your day-to-day quality of life.

### **What Causes Asthma?**

Asthma can develop at any age. What exactly causes the bronchial tubes to become swollen is still not known. However, possible risk factors for developing asthma in childhood include:

- Family history of allergy and allergic disorders
- High exposure of airborne allergy causing substances (pet dander, house dust mites, cockroaches, mold) among susceptible children in the first year of life
- Exposure to tobacco smoke (this includes exposure to smoke on your unborn child)
- Frequent respiratory infections early in life
- Low birth weight and respiratory distress syndrome

Possible risk factors for developing asthma as an adult include:

- Exposure to certain chemicals in the workplace
- Exposure to respiratory infection or allergy-causing substances
- Smoking

### **What Causes an Asthma Attack?**

During an asthma attack, airway muscles tighten, the inside of the airway swells, and more mucus is produced. Less air can get in and out of the lungs and breathing becomes difficult. Due to swelling, the airways of people with asthma are twitchy or hyper-sensitive and, therefore, easily irritated. Irritants that cause an asthma attack are called "triggers". Examples of common asthma triggers are: pollen, mold, dust, pet dander, air pollution, cold air, smoking (including second hand smoke), exercise, and emotional upset.

Though very mild symptoms may not require immediate attention, they can never be ignored; and usually some intervention is necessary. It is, therefore, recommended that a person with asthma have a written action plan that will say what steps to take and when to take them.



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## What are the Symptoms of Asthma?

If you think you might have asthma, you should visit your doctor for a diagnosis. Every person experiences an asthma attack differently. You might experience all of the following problems or just a few:

- Shortness of breath (breathing out is more difficult than breathing in)
- Wheezing (noisy breathing that starts off as a whistling sound and then becomes a shrill noise as breathing becomes more difficult)
- Chest tightness (you feel as though air is trapped in the lungs and you can't breathe it out), or pain around the chest
- Persistent cough that can last several weeks

An asthma attack can develop suddenly, or gradually, taking anywhere from a few minutes or even a few days. Sometimes people, especially children, will appear to be uneasy and restless just before having an asthma attack.

## Severity of Asthma Attacks

Asthma attacks can range from the mild to the severe.

**Severe Asthma Attacks:** Symptoms can include any of the following:

- You might feel breathless and find breathing very difficult
- You might have difficulty finishing a sentence in one breath
- Your neck muscles feel tight when you breathe
- Your lips and fingernails might have a grayish or bluish color
- The skin on your chest might be sucked in around your ribs

When this happens you need to take your "rescue" medication immediately and seek emergency medical help. Do not wait before getting help because it is possible that your airways will close completely and make breathing impossible. People who have waited too long before seeking medical help have died from asthma!

**Moderate and Mild Asthma Attacks:** Symptoms can include any of the following:

- A tight feeling in your chest
- Coughing or spitting up mucus
- You may feel restless or have trouble sleeping
- You may have wheezing or noisy breathing

When this happens, you should take your rescue medication. This medication should take just a few minutes to work - know about how long it will take before your medication relieves your symptoms. Be sure to talk with your doctor if your medication is taking longer to work than it is supposed to.

Sudden severe asthma attacks can occur even if a person has mild asthma. These asthma attacks can be life-threatening. If you experience a sudden severe asthma attack, seek emergency care immediately.



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**Second Wave Asthma Attacks:** Beware - sometimes people may experience a second wave after the initial asthma attack has eased-up. This happens because of changes in the airways during the initial asthma attack that cause the swelling to continue. This second wave will make breathing more difficult. You might also be more sensitive to irritants - this, in turn, can trigger more asthma attacks.

If you experience a second wave, you might need to be admitted to hospital to receive medical care.

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## **Congestive Heart Failure: Information for Patients**

If you have congestive heart failure (CHF), our Disease Management nurses can help you learn more about your illness. The program has been designed to provide information and tips for managing your condition. By making the right choices in life and with the support of your nurse you will be able to manage your disease better!

### **What is Congestive Heart Failure?**

The heart is made of specialized muscle and acts as a powerful pump that sends blood flowing throughout the body. Our blood contains the oxygen and nutrients that the body needs in order to function. When the heart muscle is not pumping blood as strongly as it should, the body does not receive enough oxygen and nutrients to function properly. This poor pumping action by the heart is known as congestive heart failure.

The heart's weakened pumping action causes body fluid (water) to back-up into the lungs, kidneys, and other parts of the body such as the arms, legs, ankles, and feet. This congestion, combined with a poor supply of oxygen, causes you to feel very tired, short of breath, and to experience swelling. Everyday activities such as walking, household chores, and climbing stairs become difficult.

Congestive heart failure is a common illness among those 65 years and older. About 40,000 British Columbians have been diagnosed this condition.

Congestive heart failure has no cure. With proper care, including medication and a healthy lifestyle, you should be able to manage the symptoms and improve your health and quality of life.

### **What are the Symptoms of Congestive Heart Failure?**

If you think you may have congestive heart failure, you must visit your doctor for a diagnosis. Some common symptoms you may experience if you have CHF are described below.

Depending on how weak your heart is, these symptoms can range from moderate to severe. You may experience one or all of them, or possibly none of the symptoms. The number of symptoms you experience is not an indication of how weak your heart is.

- **Shortness of breath** - Because congestive heart failure causes body fluid to back-up into the lungs you may experience shortness of breath that worsens when you exert yourself or try to exercise. You may also experience difficulty breathing when you are lying flat, and at night when trying to sleep. This is because blood from elevated legs returns to the heart causing congestion in the lungs. During sleep, congestion can also occur due to depressed breathing. This discomfort can often be relieved by sitting up or sleeping on several pillows.
- **Dry, hacking cough or wheezing** - You may experience a dry, hacking cough or wheezing because fluid has backed-up into the lungs.
- **Swollen ankles and legs** - Swelling in the lower limbs can occur as a result of body fluid backing-up into body tissues. Referred to as edema, swelling in your ankles and legs is



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likely to be more pronounced later in the day because gravity increases the amount and pressure of blood in the veins of the leg.

- **Acute pulmonary edema** - This is a severe and sudden worsening of congestive heart failure. Symptoms include severe shortness of breath, a cough that is sometimes tinged with blood, profuse sweating, and anxiety. This condition is life-threatening and must be treated immediately as it leads to a dangerously low level of oxygen in the blood.
- **Sudden weight gain** - If the extra water and salt are not being removed by your kidneys, the excess fluid will result in sudden weight gain.
- **Fatigue/low energy** - Because the body's organs and muscles are not receiving enough oxygen and nutrients due to the reduced blood flow, you may feel tired and/or lack energy. Fatigue can also occur because the body is not removing waste products as quickly as it should.
- **Mental confusion** - Sometimes congestive heart failure can reduce blood flow to the brain, causing a person to feel confused. This symptom most often occurs among elderly persons.
- **A loss or change in appetite** - You may experience a loss or change in appetite due to body fluid backing-up between the stomach and intestines, or because your body does not have the energy to digest food. Even if you have only eaten very little you may nonetheless feel full. You might also experience nausea with abdominal pain or tenderness.
- **Chest pain** - Chest pain is a common symptom of angina and heart attack - the leading causes of congestive heart failure.
- **Frequent urination** - You may find that during the night you may have to urinate more frequently than usual. This is because extra body fluid is returning to the bloodstream while you are resting.
- **Rapid and irregular heartbeat** - Changes in the rhythm of your heart can occur because the heart has to beat faster to pump enough blood to the body.

## What Causes Congestive Heart Failure?

Congestive heart failure develops gradually over time and results from underlying conditions. These conditions may include:

- **High blood pressure** - Hypertension or high blood pressure is the most common cause of congestive heart failure. The heart has to work harder because it must pump blood against resistance, this strains the heart muscle. Your blood pressure is high when the reading is equal to or greater than 140/90. It is important to keep blood pressure under control because it increases the risk of heart attack, stroke and other heart diseases.
- **Previous heart attack** - A previous heart attack can damage the heart muscle.
- **Heart valve disease** - Faulty heart valves can cause improper blood flow to the heart. This increases the heart's workload, which damages the heart muscle.



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- **Coronary artery disease** - An inadequate oxygen supply to the heart resulting from coronary artery disease can damage or destroy heart muscle tissue.
- **Heart infection** - An infection of the heart can weaken the heart.
- **Excessive use of alcohol or drugs** can also cause the heart muscle to weaken.

To determine whether your symptoms are actually a sign of congestive heart failure, your doctor will need to conduct a number of tests. In addition to taking your history and conducting a physical examination, your doctor will likely request the following tests and procedures:

- **Blood tests** - Blood tests are used to assess kidney and thyroid function, check cholesterol levels, as well as determine whether you have anemia. Anemia is a blood condition in which there is not enough hemoglobin in the red blood cells to transport oxygen throughout the body. Blood tests will also check for B-type Natriuretic Peptide (BNP) - a substance secreted from the lower chamber of the heart. BNP increases when congestive heart failure worsens and decreases when your condition is stable.
- **Chest x-ray** - A chest x-ray determines if there is fluid build-up around your heart and lungs, or if your heart is enlarged.
- **Electrocardiogram** - An electrocardiogram measures your heart's electrical activity. It is a very helpful test because it can detect the presence of a heart attack, abnormal heart rhythms, an enlarged heart, or damage to the heart muscle tissue resulting from inadequate oxygen supply to the heart (cardiac ischemia).
- **Graded test or stress test** - This test determines how physical activity affects your heart.

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## Diabetes: Information for Patients

If you have diabetes the Disease Management program may help you learn more about your illness. The program has been designed to provide information and tips for improving the management of your condition. Diabetes can be better managed with your nurse's support, education and the lifestyle changes you are dedicated to making!

### What is Diabetes?

Diabetes is a disease that affects the body's ability to use simple sugars (glucose) from digested foods to produce energy. The pancreas, an organ near the stomach, makes a hormone called insulin, which helps cells absorb glucose. If you have diabetes, you are unable to use the glucose in your food for energy - either because your body doesn't make enough insulin or because it doesn't use its own insulin as well as it should. This causes glucose to build up in your blood, where it can damage the heart, kidneys, eyes and nerves. If untreated, diabetes can cause serious complications including heart disease, blindness, kidney failure and limb amputations. While diabetes is one of the leading causes of death and disability, with proper care, you should be able to avoid serious complications and continue to lead your normal, day-to-day life, participating in the activities you have always enjoyed.

### What are the Symptoms of Diabetes?

People who think they may have diabetes must visit a physician for a diagnosis. A blood test performed in a laboratory is required for diagnosis. Many people with diabetes do not even know they have it because symptoms can be mild and similar to those associated with other illnesses or normal aging. Diabetes may cause the following symptoms:

- Frequent urination
- Excessive thirst
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme hunger
- Blurred vision
- Tingling or numbness in hands or feet
- Feeling tired much of the time
- Very dry skin
- Sores that are slow to heal
- Frequent infections

### What are the different types of diabetes?

There are three common types of diabetes: Type 1, Type 2 and Gestational Diabetes.

**Type 1 Diabetes**, previously called insulin-dependent diabetes or juvenile-onset diabetes, occurs when the pancreas makes little or no insulin. It usually develops in childhood or adolescence, but can occur at any age. People with Type 1 diabetes must have insulin injections every day.

**Type 2 Diabetes**, previously called non-insulin dependent diabetes or adult-onset diabetes, occurs when the pancreas cannot make enough insulin to meet the body's needs, or when the body does not use insulin properly. Type 2 diabetes usually develops in adults, particularly those



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who are over 40 and overweight; however, it is becoming increasingly common in children. Many people with Type 2 diabetes can control their diabetes through diet and regular exercise. If diet and exercise alone are not enough, insulin injections and/or oral medications may be required.

**Gestational diabetes** may develop during pregnancy if a woman is not able to produce enough insulin to keep her blood glucose levels within a range that is safe for her and her fetus. Unlike Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, gestational diabetes goes away once the baby is born. However, women who have had gestational diabetes have an increased risk of later developing Type 2 diabetes.

## **Complications of Diabetes**

Both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes may lead to serious long-term complications, including blindness, heart disease, stroke, kidney failure and limb amputations. The good news is that the development of these complications is not inevitable. It is important to understand how serious the complications of diabetes can be, and the potential for problems, so you can detect and prevent them. Diabetes care is a 24-hour a day job, but preventing complications is well worth the effort.

## **Controlling Blood Glucose Levels**

You can reduce your risk of complications by keeping your blood glucose levels as close to normal as possible. Major clinical trials have shown that tight control of blood glucose levels can prevent and slow the progression of complications, especially those involving the eyes, kidneys and nerves. This research proves that controlling blood glucose pays off.

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## **Hypertension: Information for Patients**

If you have hypertension, or high blood pressure, the Disease Management program can help you learn more about your illness. Your high blood pressure may improve with your education, life style changes and the support from our nurse at the Disease Management Program.

You should be able to control high blood pressure when the cause is unknown. This is known as essential hypertension and accounts for 90 to 95 per cent of cases of elevated blood pressure. Excess abdominal weight, limited physical activity and other lifestyle choices are risk factors for hypertension. In the other 5 to 10 per cent of cases, there may be a serious underlying cause of high blood pressure that requires urgent medical attention. Consult your physician on a regular basis to rule out any underlying causes and to help you monitor your condition.

### **What is Hypertension?**

Hypertension is the medical term for high blood pressure. Blood pressure refers to the force of blood against the blood vessel walls.

During the course of a day, a person's blood pressure continually rises and falls. However, when blood pressure constantly stays at 140/90 mm Hg or higher, a person is considered to have hypertension.

### **What Causes Hypertension?**

Hypertension can be caused by risk factors that you can and cannot change. Age (45 and over for men and 55 and over for women) and a family history of hypertension or cardiovascular disease are risk factors that you cannot control. However, risk factors you can control include smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, being overweight and being physically inactive.

Changes in your diet, such as those recommended by the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet can help prevent or reduce high blood pressure. This includes reducing the amount of fat and salt in your diet.

If you are overweight and carry excess abdominal fat, you put yourself at risk for diabetes as well as hypertension.

Mild elevations in blood pressure can be effectively controlled and often prevented through adopting a healthy lifestyle that includes:

- eating a diet that is lower in fat and salt;
- reducing abdominal fat;
- exercising regularly; and
- reducing your consumption of alcohol.



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## What are the Symptoms of Hypertension?

Hypertension usually has no symptoms. You must be tested for it. Most people find out they have hypertension as a result of a regular medical check-up, or when being examined for some other medical condition. Hypertension is a dangerous condition.

If you think you may be at risk of developing hypertension have your blood pressure tested by your physician or a nurse. Sometimes your local pharmacy, or other community program, will have blood pressure testing clinics that you can attend.

## Complications of Hypertension

Hypertension can lead to a number of potentially life-threatening conditions if not controlled or treated, including:

**Blood vessel damage:** Constant high blood pressure can damage the lining of the blood vessels. The damage can also accelerate accumulation of fatty material on blood vessel walls (atherosclerosis). This build-up, also known as plaque, narrows the walls of the blood vessels, reducing the amount of blood flowing to the body's organs. The reduced blood flow makes the heart and kidneys work harder, and over time can damage body organs. The narrowing also makes the circulation more prone to blockage by blood clots leading to heart attacks and strokes.

**Heart disease:** Hypertension is a major risk factor for heart attack, and the number one risk factor for congestive heart failure (CHF).

**Stroke:** Hypertension is the leading risk factor for stroke. Very high blood pressure can make a weakened blood vessel rupture and bleed into the brain, causing a stroke. A blood clot blocking a narrowed artery can also cause a stroke.

**Chronic kidney disease:** Hypertension is the second leading cause of chronic kidney disease (diabetes is the first). Hypertension not only causes kidney disease, but it also speeds the deterioration of kidney function to the point where life-saving measures, such as dialysis or kidney transplant, are needed.

**Retinopathy (eye damage):** High blood pressure can cause a blood vessel to burst or bleed. This can lead to impairments such as blurred vision, or even blindness.

The higher your blood pressure, the greater the risk you have of developing these medical problems.

Furthermore, you are at greater risk of complications if you have hypertension and:

- you smoke
- your cholesterol level is high
- you have diabetes
- there is a history of coronary heart disease in your family (e.g. parent or sibling)
- you are male
- you are overweight
- you are physically inactive
- you have an enlarged lower left heart chamber

If you have any of the risk factors listed above, be sure to tell your doctor during your next visit. Ask your doctor about having your blood pressure tested.



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