Heart failure can be confusing, but treatment can offer hope for patients

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Question: My father who is 76 has been struggling over the last few months to get up the stairs because he would get so out of breath. He was also having a lot of difficulty breathing when lying down and had started sleeping in his reclining chair at night.

I didn’t realize how bad things were until I came home for Christmas and saw how swollen his feet and ankles were.

That’s when I made him see the doctor, who, after running some tests, diagnosed him with "heart failure." I don’t understand -- he didn’t have a heart attack. Is heart failure treatable? The doctor talked about his ejection fractions, but I’m lost. Is there any hope of treatment or recovery for someone with heart failure?

Answer: The term “heart failure” can sometimes be confusing.

Heart failure is a condition in which the heart doesn’t work the way it’s supposed to; blood and oxygen are not getting to other organs.

It’s a common condition — around 5 million people in the United States have heart failure. About 550,000 new cases are diagnosed each year.

Unlike heart attack, which is a sudden event, heart failure usually occurs gradually over a period of time, during which this series of events occurs:

- Weak blood pumping ability — Heart failure is a condition in which the heart muscle has become weaker than normal and doesn’t pump the way it’s supposed to. The heart is unable to pump enough blood and oxygen to meet the body’s needs.

- Swelling and shortness of breath — When this happens, blood that should be pumped out of the heart backs up in the lungs and other parts of the body. This is why many people with heart failure have shortness of breath or swelling in the extremities. Sometimes you may hear heart failure called CHF (congestive heart failure).

- Increasing heart damage — As the heart strains to do its work, the heart muscle fibers stretch and the chambers of the heart enlarge. This further weakens the heart’s ability to perform.

The symptoms you describe in your question, shortness of breath, difficulty sleeping, and retaining fluid, are all classic symptoms.

Measuring how well the heart is pumping

One of the ways to measure the heart’s pumping ability is “ejection fraction.” With each heartbeat, a normal left ventricle pumps out or “ejects” 55-60% of the blood it receives. This is known as the “ejection fraction." In heart failure, the
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