FlexiLearnHub

Knowledge Hub

Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Heart Failure Awareness in Care Settings

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 063

Version 1.0 - **First Published**: August 2026

www.flexilearnhub.com

Part of the FlexiLearnHub Professional Knowledge Library

Introduction

Heart failure is a long-term condition in which the heart is unable to pump blood around the body as effectively as it should. It does **not** mean that the heart has stopped working, but it may require ongoing treatment and monitoring.

Symptoms can develop gradually or sometimes worsen more quickly. Common symptoms include **breathlessness, tiredness, reduced ability to exercise and swelling of the ankles or legs**. Some individuals may also experience coughing, difficulty sleeping because of breathlessness or changes in their ability to complete everyday activities.

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with heart failure. Understanding the person's usual condition, following their individual care plan and recognising significant changes can help ensure concerns are reported and appropriate support is obtained promptly.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding heart failure awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise common symptoms associated with heart failure.
- Understand how breathlessness and fatigue can affect everyday activities.
- Recognise swelling in the ankles, feet or legs.
- Understand the importance of knowing an individual's usual condition.
- Recognise changes that may indicate the person's condition is worsening.
- Support prescribed care, medication and monitoring arrangements within their authorised role.
- Allow individuals sufficient time and rest when completing activities.
- Record and report significant changes accurately.
- Recognise when urgent or emergency assistance may be required.
- Promote dignity, independence and person-centred care.

Recognising Changes

An individual living with heart failure may have ongoing symptoms as part of their usual condition. What is particularly important for care staff is recognising when those symptoms **change or become noticeably worse**.

Changes may include:

- Increasing breathlessness.
- Becoming breathless during activities previously managed comfortably.
- Increased swelling of the feet, ankles or legs.
- Greater tiredness or weakness than usual.
- Difficulty lying flat because of breathlessness.
- Waking at night feeling breathless.
- Reduced appetite or ability to complete normal activities.
- Rapid or unexpected changes in weight where weight monitoring forms part of the individual's care plan.

These changes should be recorded and reported according to the individual's care plan and organisational procedures.

Key Message

Never assume that worsening breathlessness or swelling is simply normal for someone with heart failure.

Care staff should know what is usual for the individual, observe for significant changes and report concerns promptly.

Early recognition of deterioration can help ensure the individual receives appropriate assessment and treatment.

Understanding Heart Failure

Heart failure occurs when the heart cannot pump blood around the body as effectively as the body needs. This may happen because the heart has become too weak or too stiff to work efficiently.

Heart failure is usually a long-term condition. Treatment can help control symptoms and may help slow progression, but individuals may experience periods when their symptoms become worse.

Care staff do not need to diagnose heart failure or determine the cause of symptoms. Their role is to understand how the condition affects the individual, follow the person's care plan and recognise changes that require reporting or further assessment.

Common Symptoms of Heart Failure

Individuals living with heart failure may experience:

- Breathlessness during activity or while resting.
- Increased breathlessness when lying flat.
- Waking during the night feeling breathless.
- Persistent tiredness or weakness.
- Swollen feet, ankles or legs caused by fluid build-up.
- Reduced ability to carry out normal activities.
- Feeling light-headed or dizzy.
- A persistent cough in some individuals.
- Changes in appetite.
- Rapid or unexpected weight gain associated with fluid retention.

Not everyone will experience the same symptoms, and some symptoms may have causes unrelated to heart failure.

Supporting Everyday Activities

Heart failure can make everyday activities tiring. Care staff can support individuals by:

- Allowing sufficient time for washing, dressing, walking and other activities.
- Avoiding unnecessarily rushing the person.
- Encouraging appropriate rest periods.
- Supporting safe mobility and independence according to the care plan.
- Helping the individual adopt a comfortable position if they become breathless.
- Ensuring prescribed mobility aids are available where required.
- Supporting agreed nutrition and fluid arrangements.
- Following any prescribed weight-monitoring arrangements accurately.
- Supporting prescribed medication only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Reporting significant changes in symptoms or abilities promptly.

Monitoring Weight and Fluid Changes

Some people with heart failure may be advised by their healthcare team to have their weight monitored regularly because **rapid weight gain can sometimes indicate fluid retention**.

Where weight monitoring forms part of the individual's care plan, staff should:

- Follow the agreed monitoring procedure.
- Record measurements accurately.
- Be alert to significant or rapid changes.
- Report changes according to the person's care plan and escalation instructions.

Care staff should **not independently restrict an individual's fluids, alter medication or change prescribed treatment** unless this is specifically within their authorised role and supported by appropriate clinical instructions.

Remember

Breathlessness, swelling and tiredness may be part of an individual's established heart failure symptoms, but **a noticeable change from their usual condition is important**.

Increasing breathlessness, greater swelling, rapid weight change or a significant reduction in the person's ability to carry out normal activities should be taken seriously and reported promptly in accordance with their care plan.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff have an important role in supporting individuals living with heart failure and recognising when their condition may be changing. Because symptoms can vary considerably, staff should understand the person's usual condition, individual care plan and agreed escalation procedures.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat the individual with dignity, patience and respect.
- Know what is normal for the person's breathing, mobility and general wellbeing.
- Follow the individual's care plan and prescribed treatment arrangements.
- Allow sufficient time for everyday activities and appropriate rest periods.
- Support safe mobility and independence according to the person's abilities.
- Observe for increasing breathlessness, swelling, fatigue or other changes.
- Follow prescribed weight-monitoring arrangements where these form part of the care plan.
- Support prescribed medication only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Never independently alter medication, fluid restrictions or other prescribed treatment.
- Record relevant observations and measurements accurately.
- Report significant changes promptly.
- Follow organisational procedures and seek appropriate clinical or emergency assistance when required.

When to Raise Concerns

Report concerns promptly if the individual:

- Becomes noticeably more breathless than usual.
- Develops increasing swelling of the feet, ankles or legs.
- Has rapid or unexpected weight gain where weight is being monitored.
- Becomes increasingly tired, weak or unable to complete usual activities.
- Develops new or worsening difficulty lying flat because of breathlessness.
- Wakes during the night with increased breathlessness.
- Develops a new or worsening persistent cough.
- Experiences dizziness, faintness or significant changes in wellbeing.
- Has reduced appetite or significant changes in food or fluid intake.
- Shows any other noticeable deterioration from their usual condition.

Always follow the individual's care plan and organisational escalation procedures.

When to Call 999

Some symptoms may indicate a **medical emergency**.

Call **999** if the individual:

- Has severe or sudden difficulty breathing.
- Is struggling to breathe and cannot speak normally.
- Develops sudden or severe chest pain, particularly if it does not resolve.
- Collapses, loses consciousness or is difficult to wake.
- Develops blue, grey or unusually pale lips or skin.
- Becomes suddenly confused or severely unwell.
- Has rapidly worsening symptoms and you believe their life may be at risk.

If you are seriously concerned that the individual is experiencing a life-threatening emergency, **call 999 and follow emergency procedures**.

Supporting Emotional Wellbeing

Living with heart failure can affect emotional wellbeing as well as physical health. Breathlessness, fatigue and reduced independence may lead to anxiety, frustration or reduced confidence.

Care staff can help by:

- Listening to the individual's concerns.
- Providing calm reassurance when appropriate.
- Encouraging participation and independence within the person's abilities.
- Allowing activities to be completed at a comfortable pace.
- Supporting social interaction and activities where appropriate.
- Recognising changes in mood or behaviour and reporting concerns.
- Involving the individual in decisions about their everyday care.

Good Practice Reminder

Know what is normal for the individual.

Increasing breathlessness, swelling, fatigue or a significant change in ability should never simply be dismissed as part of getting older or living with heart failure.

Careful observation, accurate recording and **prompt reporting of deterioration** can help ensure the individual receives appropriate assessment and treatment.

Summary

Heart failure is a long-term condition in which the heart is unable to pump blood around the body as effectively as it should. Common symptoms can include breathlessness, fatigue, reduced ability to carry out everyday activities and swelling of the feet, ankles or legs.

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with heart failure by understanding what is normal for the person, following their individual care plan and recognising significant changes in their condition.

Increasing breathlessness, swelling, fatigue, rapid weight changes or reduced ability to complete usual activities should be reported promptly. Severe or sudden symptoms may require emergency medical assistance.

Heart Failure Awareness Checklist

✓ Know the individual's usual symptoms and general level of wellbeing.

✓ Follow the person's individual care plan and prescribed treatment arrangements.

✓ Allow sufficient time for activities and appropriate rest periods.

✓ Support safe mobility and independence wherever possible.

✓ Observe for increasing breathlessness, swelling or fatigue.

✓ Follow agreed weight-monitoring arrangements where these form part of the care plan.

✓ Record observations and measurements accurately.

✓ Support prescribed medication only when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ **Never independently alter medication, fluid restrictions or prescribed treatment.**

✓ Report significant changes from the individual's usual condition promptly.

✓ Recognise severe or sudden symptoms as a potential medical emergency and **call 999 when required**.

Further Information

For further guidance on heart failure, visit:

NHS – Heart Failure
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-failure/

British Heart Foundation – Heart Failure
https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/conditions/heart-failure

NICE – Chronic Heart Failure in Adults
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng106

Care Quality Commission (CQC)
https://www.cqc.org.uk/

Continue Your Learning with FlexiLearnHub

Knowledge Hub
https://flexilearnhub.com/knowledge-hub/

Professional Online Courses
https://flexilearnhub.com/our-courses/

Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- Resource 014 – Preventing Falls in Care Settings
- Resource 018 – Supporting Independence in Care Settings
- Resource 022 – Recognising and Responding to Pain in Care Settings
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
- Resource 049 – Frailty Awareness
- Resource 062 – COPD Awareness in Care Settings

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

- Person-Centred Care Awareness
- Medication Awareness
- Nutrition & Hydration Awareness
- Moving & Handling Awareness

Copy Right & Disclaimer

© 2026 FlexiLearnHub. All rights reserved.

https://flexilearnhub.com

This resource has been produced by FlexiLearnHub to support awareness and continuing professional development within the health and social care sector. It is intended for educational purposes only and should not replace formal training, professional judgement, organisational policies or current UK legislation. Care staff should always follow their employer's procedures and seek advice from a senior colleague or appropriate healthcare professional where necessary.

This resource may be downloaded, printed and shared in its full original, unaltered format for personal, educational and workplace training purposes. It must not be modified, reproduced for commercial gain, sold or republished without prior written permission of FlexiLearnHub.

Information contained within this guide is intended for general awareness only and should always be used alongside current legislation, organisational policies, professional guidance and individual care plans where applicable.