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DR. GOTT

PETER GOTT, M.D.



DEAR DR. GOTT: I'm an 89-year-old male with congestive heart failure. I'm currently taking Micro-K, Lasix and Lanoxin. How serious is this, and will I overcome it?

DEAR READER: Congestive heart failure is a common manifestation of heart disease. When cardiac muscle contracts ineffectively, excess fluid builds up in tissues, causing congestion. This usually affects the lungs, leading to difficulty breathing, especially during physical exertion.

Congestive heart failure is usually treated in three ways. First, doctors try to increase the strength of cardiac muscle contraction. Lanoxin (purified digitalis) is prescribed for this purpose. The drug has a proven track record and has been used for years to stimulate more vigorous heart-muscle action, as well as to slow the pulse. It must be administered cautiously, as its side effects — notably nausea and heart electrical-blockage — can present problems, especially in older patients.

Second, diuretic medicine — such as Lasix — forces the kidneys to excrete more fluid than they normally would. The regular use of Lasix will often release excess water from the tissues, improve breathing, eliminate edema (swelling of the ankles and lower legs) and reduce the work of the heart muscle. Lasix (and other diuretics like it) do promote an inappropriate loss of potassium, a mineral needed by the body for normal muscle functioning. Hence, doctors usually prescribe potassium supplements (such as Micro-K) to replenish the losses. Lasix is often given with Lanoxin; the combination works well.

Third, physicians may treat congestive heart failure by giving drugs that reduce arterial resistance, thereby reducing the work of the heart. Such medicines include nitroglycerine and angiotensin converting enzyme, or ACE inhibitors. These medicines are often used in conjunction with diuretics. Their major side effect is unacceptably low blood pressure, so they should be used with caution.

Evidently, your doctor has chosen to administer Lanoxin, Lasix and potassium only, reserving the third class of drugs for the future, should you need additional treatment.

Congestive heart failure is a serious consequence of heart disease. It means that irreparable damage has occurred; without therapy, the situation could progress to pulmonary edema, a potentially fatal form of severe heart failure. However, if you follow your doctor's instructions and take appropriate medicine, your congestive heart failure can be improved and be controlled.

Other treatment includes stopping smoking and drinking alcohol because both nicotine and alcohol interfere with normal cardiac functioning. Also, some people are helped by reducing dietary salt, which can cause fluid overload, increased cardiac work and hypertension in individuals susceptible to high blood pressure. Because you have heart trouble and might benefit from a diet to protect your heart, I am sending you a free copy of my Health Report "Eating Right For A Healthy Heart."

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