

What you should know about acute heart failure

Written by

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(StatePoint) It's easy to be misled by the many misconceptions about heart disease -- for example -- that it only affects the elderly or those with unhealthy diets.

But in reality, every 40 seconds someone in America dies from heart disease, making it a leading cause of death in the country.

One of the most impactful heart diseases affecting millions of Americans is acute heart failure (AHF), which significantly reduces life expectancy and impacts quality of life.

Although HF sounds final, it does not mean the heart has actually "failed" or stopped. Rather, it occurs when the heart is unable or "fails" to pump enough oxygen-rich blood through the body.

AHF can occur in people who have never had heart failure (HF) before or when people with chronic HF suffer critical episodes where symptoms become worse and urgent hospital treatment is required.

AHF is not the same as a heart attack, cardiac arrest, or a heart rhythm abnormality, although those conditions and others may contribute to the AHF episode.

The most common symptoms of AHF include shortness of breath, known as dyspnea, which can substantially incapacitate a person. Fluid build-up in the lungs and throughout the body is another common symptom and is often described by patients as a sensation that feels close to drowning.

"Every episode of AHF results in a downward spiral of worsening health and damage to vital organs such as the heart and kidneys which decreases the patient's chance of surviving

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another episode," says Dr. Hal Skopicki a cardiologist at Stony Brook Medical Center in New York. "Anyone experiencing AHF symptoms should seek immediate medical attention."

Patients at-risk of AHF should understand that seeking prompt, accurate diagnosis and treatment is critical to long-term survival. Then, once discharged from the hospital, education and support are keys to making the necessary lifestyle changes that can help avoid another episode.

The American College of Cardiology has more information about AHF at cardiosmart.org .

Take steps to learn more about this life-threatening disease and educate your love ones.