

HEART FAILURE



The UC Irvine Heart Failure Program has been awarded a Gold Seal of Approval for quality from The Joint Commission.

For many people, the thought of heart failure conjures up images of an out-of-the-blue emergency in which the heart suddenly stops beating.

But in reality, heart failure is a process in which the heart muscle becomes so weakened over time that it can no longer pump enough blood to meet the body's needs.

"Heart failure is generally the result of another disease such as high blood pressure, a heart-valve problem, coronary artery disease, disorders of the heart's electrical system and other chronic conditions," says cardiologist

Dr. Dawn Lombardo, director of the UC Irvine Heart Failure Program. In the early stages, patients may not experience any

symptoms. But as the condition progresses, warning signs may include fatigue and shortness of breath. "Many individuals also suffer from swelling of the legs, ankles and feet due to the heart's decreased pumping action," says Lombardo. Eventually, heart failure can become so debilitating that patients become exhausted walking across a room or climbing a few stairs.

The big picture. At the new UC Irvine Cardiovascular Center, nationally and internationally acclaimed cardiologists, cardiothoracic surgeons and vascular surgeons treat thousands of patients each year. The UC Irvine Heart Failure Program is an integral part of this effort and the only program of its kind in Orange County to earn a

Gold Seal of Approval for quality from The Joint Commission. Equipped with an arsenal of services and emerging technologies to combat this life-threatening condition, the center offers leading-edge diagnostics, including three-dimensional transthoracic echocardiography. "This imaging modality produces detailed information about the heart's structure, size and function," says Lombardo.



Other tests range from cardiac catheterization to multi-detector CT imaging and nuclear scans.

People with heart failure can live full lives with the right treatment and lifestyle choices.

Once the diagnosis is confirmed, treatment focuses on correcting the underlying disorders that contribute to the condition—and treating the heart failure itself. If high blood pressure, thyroid disorders or elevated cholesterol levels are involved, medication is prescribed to control these problems. If the heart failure was precipitated by an arrhythmia, a procedure known as ablation

can restore normal cardiac rhythm. And if clogged coronary arteries have caused the patient's heart failure, blood flow is restored with coronary balloon angioplasty and stent placement performed in the cardiac catheterization laboratories located in the new UC Irvine Douglas Hospital. This is also the site for cardiac bypass surgery, which takes place in the hospital's state-of-the-art operating rooms.

Back to the beat. Medication is the primary therapy for heart failure. "A combination of drugs is used to improve heart function, relieve symptoms and slow the progression of the disease," says Lombardo. ACE inhibitors lower blood pressure and reduce the heart's workload. Beta blockers decrease the failing heart's tendency to beat faster, thus reducing stress on it. Digoxin can help boost the heart's weakened pumping action. And diuretics can eliminate excess fluid from the body. "In severe heart failure, a potassium-sparing diuretic called spironolactone works synergistically with ACE inhibitors and beta blockers to prolong survival," says Lombardo. "Since medications are individually tailored and frequently adjusted, treatment for heart failure must be carefully and constantly managed."

In addition to drug therapy, other treatments may be needed. "A biventricular pacemaker can improve the heart's ability to pump blood by coordinating heart-muscle contractions," says Lombardo. In some cases, an implantable cardioverter defibrillator may also be necessary to stop rapid, abnormal heart rhythms that may develop. Additionally, patients with advanced heart failure may benefit from a small pump implanted in the left ventricle that assists in circulating blood throughout the body. "When drugs and other approaches are combined with lifestyle changes, many patients experience a dramatic improvement in their condition," says Lombardo.

To arrange for a consultation with a UC Irvine Heart Failure Program physician, call 714.456.6699.