



Clinical Update

For Telephone Triage Nurses

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Triage of Patients with Heart Failure Post – Hospitalization

Heart failure (HF) is the leading cause of admissions and readmissions to hospitals. Many times these admissions are necessary. However, in some cases readmissions could be avoided with improved pre and post-discharge care. Health care policy-makers, researchers, and providers are trying new strategies to help reduce unnecessary readmissions. Their goals are to improve the quality of care and life for patients with HF. Another goal is to reduce health care costs. Telehealth nurses can play an important role in helping achieve these goals.

How Can Triage Nurses Help?

- Treating HF symptoms before they become severe can help prevent a hospital readmission. During post discharge follow-up calls, you can help patients recognize early warning signs that require medical attention.
- Patients often have many questions when they return home. You can reassure patients and answer questions. You can review self-care and the importance of following the medical treatment plan. Not adhering to the treatment plan and lack of follow-up care can lead to an unnecessary readmission.

The Scope of the Problem - Heart Failure:

- Affects over 5 million people in the United States.
- Is a serious chronic disease. About 50% of patients with heart failure die within 5 years of diagnosis.
- Results in 12 to 15 million office visits and 6.5 million hospital days/year.
- Is the leading cause of hospital readmissions. About 25% of patients hospitalized for HF are readmitted within 30 days. About 50% are readmitted within 6 months.
- Costs the nation about \$32 billion dollars each year. This includes cost of missed work days, health care services, and medicines (CDC)

Symptoms of Heart Failure Include:

- Edema (swelling of the feet, ankles, legs or stomach)
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath (dyspnea)
- Shortness of breath when lying down (orthopnea)
- Weakness
- Weight gain



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Heart Failure Follow Up-Call – Key Task of the Triage Nurse

- Your key task is to assess whether the patient is getting better, staying the same, or getting worse. It is helpful to ask direct questions such as: *Are you getting better? Do you feel the same? Are you getting worse?*
- Heart failure is a chronic disease with varying degrees of severity. Patients who feel the same are usually at their baseline or in their “stable” state.

How patient feels compared to time of discharge	Disposition (Urgency)	Role of Triage Nurse
Patient feels better	Home Care Usually can be managed at home	Reassurance Reinforce need to keep follow-up visits Review and reinforce treatment plan Review self-care advice
Patient feels the same	Home Care Usually can be managed at home Schedule FU visit with HCP	- Daily weights - Limit salt (sodium) intake - Exercise daily - Fluid restriction (if ordered) - Avoid OTC medicines (NSAIDS) Review when to call back (warning signs) Provide information about HF if needed
Patient feels worse	Usually needs to be seen Urgency of visit depends on severity of symptoms	Refer patient in for medical evaluation Consider any of the above if patient does not need to be seen urgently Review symptoms of HF (see list)

Why are Daily Weights Important?

- Most patients with HF have a target weight range. The patient’s HF symptoms are usually stable when in this range.
- Many patients with HF will gain weight a few days before they develop more severe HF symptoms. The weight increase is due to extra fluids accumulating in the body.
- A significant weight loss may also indicate problems (e.g., too much diuretic).
- If there is a significant weight gain or loss, the patient may need a medicine adjustment. Patients should have a plan for when they should call their doctor with weight changes.
- The patient should weigh themselves at the same time of day, using the same scale, and wearing similar clothes.
- It is helpful to use a chart or calendar to record weights.

A triage guideline has been developed to assist the triager when conducting HF follow-up calls:

Heart Failure-Post Hospitalization Follow-Up Call.

I am interested in hearing how this guideline is working for you in your practice.

*Regards,
David Thompson, M.D.*

References

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Co-Author:
Jeanine Feirer, RN, MSN

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Barton Schmitt, M.D.
David Thompson, M.D.