



## PENNSYLVANIA HEALTHCARE PROFILES

# Better Health by Heart

Penn State Health helps patients live longer, healthier lives by preventing, recognizing, and treating heart failure.



**A**t Penn State Health, world-class care makes all the difference—especially when it comes to heart failure, a life-threatening condition that impacts hundreds of thousands nationally each year.

“Heart failure happens when your heart can’t keep up with demand,” says Joy Cotton, M.D., a cardiovascular disease specialist providing noninvasive cardiology care at Penn State Health Lancaster Medical Center. “There are two basic types: One where the heart doesn’t pump well enough, and another where the heart doesn’t relax well enough.”

Both prevent the heart from adequately supplying the body’s cells with enough blood, making even light activities like walking and climbing stairs difficult.

Heart failure is a serious condition, and patients shouldn’t ignore warning signs like fatigue, shortness of breath,



Joy Cotton, M.D.

and swelling in the lower extremities, Dr. Cotton notes. Though sometimes hereditary, heart failure is often associated with coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, and a history of previous heart attacks.

“Millions of people develop heart failure, and the risk increases with age, but it isn’t a death sentence. With treatment, most patients can control their symptoms and live longer, healthier lives,” Dr. Cotton says.



Lauren Morrison, CRNP, MCS NP

## Healthy Habits

“The first step to managing heart failure is controlling the amount of fluid in the body,” says Dr. Cotton, a process that typically starts with adjusting diet and fluid intake but can also include diuretics and other medications. “When those options aren’t enough, we solicit help from Penn State Health’s advanced heart failure team.”

That’s where Lauren Morrison, CRNP, MCS NP, of Penn State Heart and Vascular

Institute, and other surgical specialists step in. “We see patients who have been managed noninvasively but continue to deteriorate,” she says.

By measuring ejection fraction, doctors can ascertain how much blood the heart pumps with each contraction. And if that dips below a certain threshold (typically below 20%), it’s time to consider more aggressive options like a left ventricle assist device or heart transplant.

“It takes a huge committee to determine whether a patient is a candidate for a heart transplant and an even bigger team to perform the procedure,” Morrison says. Many candidates wait months or years for a compatible donor organ to become available, though continuing treatment keeps patients comfortable until that day arrives.

In the meantime, mechanical support can help keep blood pumping while alleviating stress on the body’s weakened cardiovascular system.

“The number of patients on the waitlist far exceeds the number of organs available,” Morrison says. According to the United Network for Organ Sharing, over 100,000 Americans need a heart transplant.

But there is good news: Simple, heart-healthy habits like staying active, eating well, maintaining a healthy weight, and avoiding smoking can help most people significantly reduce their risk of heart failure.

“Managing heart failure is a lifelong commitment,” says Morrison. “But I love getting to know patients like family and helping them extend their time with loved ones.”

“Cardiology is my favorite part of medicine. Seeing patients respond to treatment is rewarding, and so is the satisfaction of helping them feel better and live longer,” echoes Dr. Cotton. “That’s what matters most.”