OBJECTIVES: The study was designed to determine the prevalence and mortality rate of congestive heart failure in noninstitutionalized men and women in the U.S.

BACKGROUND: Congestive heart failure is a serious condition with significant morbidity and mortality. Earlier epidemiologic descriptions of congestive heart failure were constructed from small surveys, limited data, hospital records or death certificates. No nationally representative data from noninstitutionalized persons have been examined.

METHODS: Data collected from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES-I, 1971 to 1975) were used to determine the prevalence of heart failure on the basis of both self-reporting and a clinical definition. Mortality data were derived from the NHANES-I Epidemiologic Follow-up Study (1982 to 1986).

RESULTS: The prevalence of self-reported congestive heart failure approximates 1.1% of the noninstitutionalized U.S. adult population; the prevalence of congestive heart failure based on clinical criteria is 2%. These estimates suggest that between 1 and 2 million adults are affected. Mortality at 10 and 15 years for those persons with congestive heart failure increases in graded fashion with advancing age, with men more likely to die than women. In the group greater than or equal to 55 years old, the 15-year total mortality rate was 39.1% for women and 71.8% for men.

CONCLUSIONS: Congestive heart failure is a common problem in the U.S., with significant prevalence and mortality, both of which increase with advancing age. As the population of the U.S. becomes older, the health care impact of congestive heart failure will probably grow.