

Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

Hypertension is the most commonly diagnosed condition in the U.S., accounting for over 10 million doctor visits per year. Nearly one in three adults and over half of Americans age 60 and older have hypertension.

- * Untreated hypertension can shorten one's life expectancy by 10 to 20 years.
- * By properly controlling hypertension, it is estimated that over 28,000 deaths and 50,000 strokes could be avoided, \$1.2 billion in hospital costs could be saved, and almost 12 million sick days could be eliminated.

Definition

Blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries. Each time the heart beats, it pumps out blood into the arteries. Blood pressure is highest when the heart beats (systolic pressure - the top number of a blood pressure reading). When the heart is at rest, between beats, blood pressure falls (diastolic pressure - the bottom number of a blood pressure reading).

- * 120/80 or lower is normal blood pressure - 140/90 or higher is high blood pressure

Between 120 and 139 for the top number (systolic pressure) or between 80 and 89 for the bottom number (diastolic pressure) is pre-hypertension. If you have pre-hypertension, you are more likely to develop high blood pressure at some point.

- * Blood pressure measurements are the result of the force of the blood produced by the heart and the size and condition of the arteries. Many factors can affect blood pressure, including how much water and salt you have in your body, the condition of your kidneys, nervous system or blood vessels, as well as the levels of different body hormones.

Symptoms

High blood pressure is called "the silent killer" because it often causes no symptoms for many years, even decades, until it finally damages certain critical organs. One-third of people with high blood pressure do not know they have it.

- * Symptoms that may occur include: confusion, dizziness, chest pain, headache, shortness of breath, vision changes, tiredness, nosebleed, irregular heartbeat, and ear noise such as buzzing.
- * Uncontrolled high blood pressure can result in heart attack, heart failure, kidney failure, stroke, amputation, blindness, and hardening of the arteries.
- * Hypertension is a major risk factor for heart disease, the leading cause of death in America.

Risk Factors

They include: family history, excess weight, physical inactivity, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, long-lasting stress, age, pregnancy (in some women), excessive alcohol/caffeine intake, smoking, certain medications, and dietary factors such as too much salt and not enough potassium.

* High blood pressure is more common in African Americans than Caucasians.

Prevention

All adults should have their blood pressure checked regularly -- at least once every two years -- regardless of risk factors.

* Over 80 percent of adults with high blood pressure report taking some action to control it. However, only 18 percent of people with high blood pressure have it under control.

* Blood pressure can be managed through lifestyle changes. Maintain a healthy weight. Eat a diet with less fat and sodium. Consume more fruits, vegetables, and fiber. Exercise regularly. Quit smoking. If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar under control.

Sources: NIH, American Heart Association, U.S. National Library of Medicine, cardiologychannel, Pfizer Health Solutions, MedicineNet, and Washington and Shady Grove Adventist Hospitals. This Health Bulletin is for educational purposes only. For additional information, consult your physician. Please feel free to copy and distribute this health resource.