

High blood pressure: the silent killer

by Shannon GaNun

High blood pressure is a silent killer. It often gives no warning signs to the one in four American adults who have it, and a third of the 50 million Americans who have it don't know it. In fact, people may not find out they have high blood pressure until they have trouble with their heart, brain or kidneys.

High blood pressure increases a person's chance of having a heart attack or stroke and of contracting kidney disease. It plays a role in 700,000 deaths a year, and the illnesses brought on by uncontrolled high blood pressure cost Americans billions of dollars a year.

What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force that blood exerts against artery walls. It's recorded as two numbers.

Systolic pressure is the force when the heart beats (the higher number); diastolic pressure is the force when the heart is at rest. Blood pressure is considered high when the level is 140/90 or above, on a consistent basis. The best way to measure blood pressure is with an instrument called a sphygmomanometer, which is quick, easy and painless.

In 90-95 percent of the cases of high blood pressure, called essen-

tial hypertension, the cause is unknown. You can't cure essential hypertension, but you can control it in most cases.

In the remaining five to 10 percent of cases, called secondary hypertension, high blood pressure is a symptom of a recognizable underlying problem, such as an abnormality in the blood supply to one of the kidneys or a tumor of the adrenal gland. Correcting the root cause often causes the hypertension.

Several factors increase the chance that a person will develop high blood pressure:

- ◆ A diet high in salt
- ◆ Obesity
- ◆ Heavy alcohol consumption
- ◆ A sedentary or inactive lifestyle
- ◆ Heredity
- ◆ Race (African Americans are most likely to have high blood pressure.)



- ◆ Sex (Males are more prone to high blood pressure than females.)
- ◆ Age (The older a person gets, the higher blood pressure tends to be.)

Focus on control

Because medical science doesn't understand the causes of most cases of high blood pressure, it's hard to say how to prevent it. Still, you can take steps to control it. Consult a physician when high blood pressure persists. Treatment consists of lifestyle changes and medication; a doctor may recommend one or both forms of treatment. With lifestyle changes, people may be able to lower their blood pressure without taking medicine.

Even though heredity, race, sex and age can't be changed, everyone can take action to lower their chance of developing high blood pressure:

- ◆ Maintain a healthy weight, or lose weight if overweight.
- ◆ Increase aerobic physical activity (30 to 45 minutes most days of the week).
- ◆ Eat healthy foods (choose foods lower in calories and salt).
- ◆ Drink alcoholic beverages in moderation, if at all.
- ◆ Do not smoke.

Lower your risks at work

Supervisors and companies can encourage employees to control their blood pressure by establishing regular blood pressure screenings at the workplace. "Make sure employees feel comfortable and that the

information is confidential," says Beth Reitz, director of community health services at Chesapeake General Hospital in Chesapeake, Va. Some employees don't want employers to know they have high blood pressure for fear of losing their jobs. "Make sure they know you're there to help them, not to take their job away."

Companies can also offer classes teaching employees how to manage stress. Stress raises blood pressure, but we don't understand its long-term effects. Some of the traditional methods for managing stress, such as losing weight and exercising, are good habits for overall good health.

Encouraging exercise during lunch and breaks is also a good idea. Dr. Michael J. Hogan, a consultant in hypertension and internal medicine at the Mayo Clinic, suggests starting with walking 15 minutes a day around your neighborhood, and adding a house each day. "Over four weeks, you'll get to where you're walking 30 minutes, five days a week," he says.

Finally, establish a wellness program. Organizations like the American Heart Association offer wellness programs that help employees make lifestyle changes.

Remember, you can control high blood pressure, but you can seldom cure it. By following treatment prescribed by a physician, you can reduce the risk of stroke, heart disease and kidney failure. All employees can monitor their blood pressure and keep it under control. ◆