

What You Can Do to Prevent Hypertension

Preventing Hypertension

Hypertension is one of our nation's most common life-threatening diseases. It's the underlying cause of one in six deaths in the U.S. But many people do not even know they have it until it's too late.

Hypertension is also one of our costliest diseases. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that last year it cost the United States \$76.6 billion in healthcare services, medications and missed days of work. That's a lot of money for a disease that is largely preventable.

About one in three adults in the United States have high blood pressure. Getting your blood pressure checked is important because often there are no symptoms. And if you have high blood pressure you're at risk for stroke, heart attack, kidney disease and other serious complications from hypertension. High blood pressure becomes more common as we age but it can affect people of all ages, even children.

Getting your blood pressure checked is easy. Your doctor can measure your blood pressure or you can use a machine available at many pharmacies or supermarkets. Blood pressure is written as two numbers. The first (systolic) number represents the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart beats. The second (diastolic) number represents the pressure when your heart rests between beats.

The American Heart Association considers a blood pressure reading lower than 120/80 mmHg to be healthy. A reading between 120/80 and 139/89 falls into a category called prehypertension. A value of 140/90 and higher is considered dangerous.

Eat a Healthy Diet

A diet with too much processed food can contribute to high blood pressure. Processed foods generally are high in sodium and low in vital minerals like potassium, calcium and magnesium.

The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) has been proven to lower blood pressure. The diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy foods and limits red meat, fats and added sugar. It emphasizes eating potassium-rich foods, especially fruits and vegetables, to help keep blood pressure levels healthy. All fresh fruits and vegetables are good sources of potassium and low in



sodium. Whole grains and low-fat dairy provide potassium as well. When it comes to potassium rich foods, a baked potato with the skin is the champion, delivering about 1080 mg potassium or 23 percent of the recommended daily amount. After potatoes, tomatoes and tomato products, beet greens, brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes and spinach top the list of potassium-rich veggies. On the fruit side, apricots, cantaloupe, prunes, raisins, orange juice, bananas, nectarines or figs are all rich in potassium.

Sodium is the element in table salt that can raise blood pressure. It's important to know your recommended limit for daily sodium intake. The 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that adults should limit sodium to 2,300 milligrams -- the amount in 1 teaspoon of table salt -- per day. African-Americans, people with hypertension and people who are middle-aged and older should not exceed 1,500 milligrams per day.

Keeping within these limits can be a challenge. To start, keep an eye on how much salt you add to foods you prepare at home. Try to limit sodium-rich seasonings and condiments such as salsa, mayonnaise, ketchup, soy sauce and relishes. Choose fresh fruits and vegetables and minimally processed foods at every opportunity. Read nutrition labels on the processed foods you buy. Also be aware that most fast food and restaurant meals tend to be very high in sodium.

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Maintain a Healthy Weight

Being overweight significantly increases your chances of developing high blood pressure. Losing 10 to 20 pounds can help lower your blood pressure along with your risk for heart disease and diabetes. While the original design of the DASH diet was not intended to be a weight loss plan, followers may experience weight loss due to eating healthier meals and snacks.

Be Physically Active

Regular physical activity helps maintain a healthy weight, reduces stress hormone levels and improves blood flow, all of which help keep your blood pressure in the healthy range. Strive for at least 30 to 60 minutes of brisk walking or other aerobic exercise on most days of the week. If you currently are not active, increasing your exercise level can lower your blood pressure within just a few weeks.

Reduce Stress

Stress reduction may help blood pressure control. Although stress is not considered a direct cause of hypertension, it can lead to repeated blood pressure elevations, which eventually may lead to hypertension. When one risk factor such as being overweight or physically inactive is coupled with stress, the effect on blood pressure is multiplied. Yoga, t'ai chi and relaxation techniques like meditation can help reduce stress and lower your blood pressure almost as much as aerobic exercise.

Don't Smoke

Smoking is a major cause of heart disease and is the leading preventable cause of disease and deaths in the United States. Smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke can be a contributing factor in hypertension. Nicotine causes the blood vessels to constrict and this narrowing of the vessels increases blood pressure. If you smoke, quitting is the number one thing you can do to improve your health. Talk to your doctor about options to help you quit.

Limit Alcohol

Chronic heavy drinking can increase blood pressure dramatically. And the more alcohol consumed, the stronger the link with hypertension. If you drink alcohol, limit your consumption to no more than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women.

Practice Good Sleep Habits

Certain sleep disorders, especially sleep apnea, are associated with high blood pressure. Stress hormone levels increase with sleeplessness, which can contribute to hypertension. Research suggests that adults need seven to eight hours of sleep a night. If you have trouble sleeping or have been diagnosed with a sleep disorder, you may want to consult a sleep expert.

Check Your Medications

Some prescription drugs may cause high blood pressure. These include amphetamines, ritalin, corticosteroids, hormones (including oral contraceptives) and some migraine medications. Also, many over-the-counter medications that contain pseudoephedrine and ephedrine (for example, allergy, cold, and asthma medications and appetite suppressants) can cause an elevated blood pressure reading. If you're taking certain potassium-robbing medications like the diuretic thiazide (brand-name Lasix), you may be instructed to take more potassium by eating more potassium-rich foods or using a prescription potassium supplement. Don't stop taking any prescribed medication on your own without talking to your doctor.

Treat High Blood Pressure

While the lifestyle interventions we've already discussed are the first step in high blood pressure prevention and management, sometimes further treatment may be needed in addition to lifestyle modifications. There are a number of medications that can help to control your blood pressure. All drugs may have side effects, so talk with your doctor on a regular basis.

Source

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