

Controlling Hypertension to Prevent Disease

The best figures available suggest that nearly 50 million adults in the US have high blood pressure, or hypertension. Hypertension contributes to disease of the heart, stroke, and renal failure. It is among the leading contributors to the leading causes of premature death and disability.

One of the things that makes the management of hypertension difficult is that the disease itself typically produces no symptoms. Even after it is injuring the heart, kidneys, and blood vessels to the brain, hypertension is painless. When people feel fine, they are often reluctant to take medication. But things that can't be felt can be very dangerous.

The evidence that hypertension causes, for example stroke, and that treatment of hypertension can prevent stroke is overwhelming. But that message is hard to get across to an individual. Until someone has a stroke, it may be hard for them to take seriously a disease they can't feel. Once they've had a stroke it is, of course, in many ways too late.

Hypertension is common both because many of us are genetically predisposed to it, particularly as we age, and because of lifestyle. Being sedentary or overweight increases the risk of hypertension.

Smoking or excessive alcohol ingestion can both contribute. The link to diet is widely known. In some individuals, salt or sodium intake seems to be an important factor. In others, it seems to matter less. But in general, societies like ours that have high sodium intake tend to have more hypertension.

Studies of diet and hypertension suggest that high intake of potassium and magnesium may be beneficial; both are found abundantly in fruits and vegetables. The DASH study (diet approaches to stop hypertension) suggests that a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and non-fat dairy is the best dietary defense. Such a diet is prudent for health promotion in general, and can be recommended with confidence.

So, for many of us, a healthy lifestyle would be adequate to prevent the advent of hypertension. This includes a health-promoting dietary pattern, regular physical activity, maintenance of near ideal body weight, avoidance of tobacco and excessive alcohol, and control of stress. The evidence that psychological stress can contribute to high blood pressure is quite convincing.

Similar evidence suggests that stress reduction training can be helpful. Hypertension may develop



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despite a healthy lifestyle, or because of an inability to adhere to one. If so, it often progresses slowly from borderline, to early stage, to more advanced stages. This allows ample time to detect and control it. Detection requires an occasional visit to the doctor, even if feeling fine. One of the most important functions of the "check-up" or annual physical is to detect and track hypertension.

When hypertension is detected, lifestyle management should be attempted first, unless it is already advanced. But if your doctor recommends medication, you should generally follow that advice. While all medications have potential side effects, a host of effective and safe blood pressure medications are now available. Your provider can work with you to find one that controls your blood pressure, is safe, and causes you no side effects. This process requires open and honest exchange on the part of both participants.

If you are diagnosed with hypertension, understand that what you can't feel can hurt you. The side effects of medications are real, but the side effects of untreated hypertension are generally much worse. Work with your care provider to identify a treatment that works well for you and avoids side effects. This

is almost always feasible, and may be the reason for the stroke or heart attack you never wind up having.

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