

'the silent killer'

By Dr. Bernadette Veeger
General Practitioner at Centro Mar y Salud

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

According to recent estimates, about one in three to four adults in Western Europe and the U.S. has high blood pressure, but, because there are no symptoms, nearly one-third of these people don't know they have it. In fact, many people have high blood pressure for years without knowing it. Uncontrolled high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, heart failure or kidney failure. This is why high blood pressure is often called a "silent killer." The only way to tell if you have high blood pressure is to have your blood pressure checked regularly.

ABOUT HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Everybody has - and needs - blood pressure. Without it, blood can't circulate through the body. And without circulating blood, vital organs can't get the oxygen and food that they need to work. So it's important to know about blood pressure and how to keep it within a healthy level. Normal blood pressure falls within a range; it's not one set of numbers.

When the heart beats, it pumps blood to the arteries and creates pressure in them. This pressure results from two forces. The first force is created as blood pumps into the arteries and through the circulatory system. The second is created as the arteries resist the blood flow.

If you're healthy, your arteries are muscular and elastic. They stretch when your heart pumps blood through them. How much they stretch depends on how much force the blood exerts.

Your heart beats about 60 to 80 times a minute under normal conditions. Your blood pressure rises with each heartbeat and falls when your heart relaxes between beats. Your blood pressure can change from minute to minute, with changes in posture, exercise or sleeping, but it should normally be less than 120/80 mm Hg (millimeters of mercury) for an adult. Blood pressure that stays between 120-139/80-89 is considered prehypertension and above this level (140/90 mm Hg or higher) is considered high (hypertension). Your doctor may take several readings over time before deciding whether your blood pressure is high.

If you have diabetes, other normal values apply. Your blood pressure should be lower then.

WHAT DO BLOOD PRESSURE NUMBERS INDICATE?

- *The higher (systolic) number represents the pressure when the heart is beating.
- *The lower (diastolic) number represents the pressure when the heart is resting between beats.

The systolic pressure is always stated first and the diastolic pressure second. For example: 118/76 (118 over 76); systolic = 118, diastolic = 76.

AM I AT RISK?

If you're an adult and your blood pressure is 140/90 mm Hg or above, you have hypertension and are at higher risk for heart disease, stroke and other medical problems. See a doctor and learn how to manage your blood pressure and how often to have it checked. High blood pressure has no symptoms, so if you haven't had it checked in a while, make an appointment now.

Medical science doesn't understand why most cases of high blood pressure occur, so it's hard to say how to prevent it. However, we do know that several factors may contribute to high blood pressure and raise your risk for heart attack and stroke.

CONTROLLABLE RISK FACTORS

- *Obesity - People with a body mass index (BMI) of 30.0 or higher are more likely to develop high blood pressure.
- *Eating too much salt - A high sodium intake increases blood pressure in some people.
- *Drinking too much alcohol - Heavy and regular use of alcohol can increase blood pressure dramatically.
- *Lack of physical activity - An inactive lifestyle makes it easier to become overweight and increases the chance of high blood pressure.
- *Stress - This is often mentioned as a risk factor, but stress levels are hard to measure, and responses to stress vary from person to person.

UNCONTROLLABLE RISK FACTORS

- *Race - Blacks develop high blood pressure more often than whites, and it tends to occur earlier and be more severe.
- *Heredity - If your parents or other close blood relatives have high blood pressure, you're more likely to develop it.
- *Age - In general, the older you get, the greater your chance of developing high blood pressure. It occurs most often in people over age 35. Men seem to develop it most often between age 35 and 55. Women are more likely to develop it after menopause.



WHAT YOU CAN DO:

9 WAYS TO CONTROL YOUR HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

- 1 Know your blood pressure. Have it checked regularly.
- 2 Know what your weight should be. Keep it at or below that level.
- 3 Don't use too much salt in cooking or at meals. Avoid salty foods.
- 4 Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole-grain high-fibre foods according to national heart association recommendations.
- 5 Control alcohol intake. Don't have more than one drink a day if you're a woman or two a day if you're a man.
- 6 Take your medicine exactly as prescribed. Don't run out of pills even for a single day.
- 7 Keep appointments with the doctor.
- 8 Follow your doctor's advice about physical activity.
- 9 Make certain your parents, brothers, sisters and children have their blood pressure checked regularly.

Following the recommendations of your health care professionals is essential to lowering your high blood pressure. Talk with them also if you need help with making lifestyle changes or taking your medications properly.

Sources of this article: British Heart Foundation, American Heart Association.

For more information contact
Dr. Bernadette Veeger,
General Practitioner at
Centro Mar y Salud, 952 532 065,
Paseo Marítimo, El Morche/Torrox
Costa, www.centromarysalud.com,
info@centromarysalud.com.