

HYPERTENSION

Hypertension is the medical name for high blood pressure. The pressure in your blood vessels rises when your heart pumps blood out and drops when the heart relaxes. There are thus two levels to the reading. In a healthy person, depending on the person's age, the top reading/systole is usually below 140 and the bottom reading/diastole is usually below 90. If the readings exceed these levels, we have a condition called high blood pressure.

Blood pressure varies as the heart responds to the different demands made by the body, and is lower during quiet activities and sleep and higher during bursts of activity, such as stress or exercise.

Hypertension is often referred to as the "silent killer", because it has no symptoms and can in some cases be a life-threatening condition. It is usually detected during a routine visit to the doctor/clinic.

Although hypertension does not often cause symptoms, it is a serious condition, which if not treated, raises the risk of a stroke, kidney failure, heart failure and premature death. The condition also has a detrimental impact on end organs such as eyes and kidneys if left untreated.

What you can do to lower high blood pressure

- Lose weight if you are overweight. Excess weight places an added burden on your heart.
- Follow a healthy diet- high in fibre, fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Reduce your alcohol consumption. Do not have more than two drinks a day- preferably red wine or whisky.
- Do not smoke. Smoking is an additional risk factor for heart diseases.
- Reduce your salt intake. Use no or low salt.
- Have your cholesterol level checked. High cholesterol and high blood pressure tend to go together and cause health complications.
- Exercise regularly. The benefits of regular exercise are apparent within two weeks. Ask your doctor about a suitable exercise programme.
- If excessive, reduce your tea and coffee intake, or drink decaffeinated tea or coffee.
- Remember to tell any new doctor that you may consult about your hypertension - also the anaesthetist if you are to have another procedure done.

Medical treatment

If the above measures do not bring your hypertension under control, your doctor may prescribe antihypertensive medicine. It is important that they are taken regularly and are usually required for the rest of your life. Some of these medicines can have side-effects, such as tiredness, dizziness, depression, cough or cold feet and hands. Although these side-effects may only be temporary, they should be reported to your doctor, if they do occur. It may be necessary to change the medicine prescribed.

If you are on an oral contraceptive or certain hormone replacement meds, and have high blood pressure, your doctor may recommend an alternative treatment plan. Some medicines for arthritis cause fluid retention and high blood pressure and may have to be changed. It may take a while to find the ideal treatment to manage your hypertension, so be patient with the process.

Some people say they can “feel” when their blood pressure is high, for instance when they have a headache or feel stressed. They only take their pills at this time. This is the wrong way to take the medication. It has to be taken every day, even when you are feeling well.

High blood pressure is a lifelong disease that can be controlled, but typically not cured. If you stop your medication, your blood pressure will return to its previous level, or even higher, with the accompanying risks. For this reason, it is important that you take your medication regularly, follow your doctor’s instructions closely and return for periodic blood pressure checks to the clinic. It may save you from a serious health incident.

Lifestyle changes may reduce your high blood pressure and your meds could be reduced-but always do so in consultation with healthcare professionals.

