Greenville Medical Associates

HYPERTENSION:

Overview

Blood pressure is the force of your blood pushing against the walls of your arteries. Each time your heart beats, it pumps blood into the arteries. Your blood pressure is highest when your heart beats, pumping the blood. This is called systolic pressure. When your heart is at rest, between beats, your blood pressure falls. This is called diastolic pressure.

Your blood pressure reading uses these 2 numbers. The systolic number usually comes before or above the diastolic number. A reading of:
- 119/79 or lower is normal blood pressure.
- 140/90 or higher is high blood pressure.
- Between 120 and 139 for the top number, and between 80 and 89 for the bottom number is called prehypertension. Prehypertension means you may end up with high blood pressure unless you take steps to prevent it.

High blood pressure usually has no symptoms, but it can cause serious problems such as stroke, heart failure, heart attack and kidney failure. You can control high blood pressure through healthy lifestyle habits and taking medicines, if needed.

Introduction

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a common condition that affects 1 out of every 3 adults.

Hypertension is also called the "Silent Killer" because it often has no symptoms. Hypertension can lead to severe health problems if it goes untreated for a long time.

This health information explains hypertension and how it can be prevented and controlled.

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The cells of the body need oxygen and food to survive. Oxygen and nutrients are carried to all parts of the body through the blood.

The heart pumps blood out of its chambers through blood vessels. The blood vessels that carry fresh blood from the heart to the body are called arteries.

Blood pressure is the force of blood as it presses against the walls of the arteries.

Two numbers are used to describe blood pressure. The top number, called systolic blood pressure, measures blood pressure when the heart pumps. A normal and healthy top number is equal to or less than 120.

The second number is lower than the systolic pressure and measures blood pressure when the heart rests. It is known as diastolic blood pressure. A normal and healthy bottom blood pressure number is 80 or below.

For example, a patient may have a blood pressure of 125/70. This means that the patient has a reading of 125 systolic and 70 diastolic blood pressure.

Hypertension

High blood pressure is also known as hypertension. It is a common condition in which the force of the blood against the artery walls is too high.

Blood pressure varies all the time. It is common for it to differ by 10 to 20 units when it is measured at different times, even minutes apart.

Exercise or emotional stress can increase the blood pressure. The increased blood pressure allows more blood to be pumped to the body to help the body cope with increased activity or stress. The body can tolerate a temporary rise in blood pressure.

Because of these normal variations, health care providers do not diagnose a patient with high blood pressure unless repeated measurements show it to be consistently high.

A patient may be diagnosed with high blood pressure if:
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- The top blood pressure number (systolic) is consistently equal to or higher than 140.

- The bottom blood pressure number (diastolic) is consistently equal to or higher than 90.

Prehypertension is blood pressure that is slightly high. Prehypertension may develop into high blood pressure, or hypertension, unless lifestyle changes are made.

Prehypertension and hypertension increase your risk of heart attack, stroke and heart failure.

Causes of Hypertension

The exact causes of hypertension are not known. But certain risk factors are associated with high blood pressure.

Risk factors for high blood pressure include:

- Being overweight.

- Eating a diet that is high in salt and fat.

- Lack of physical activity.

- Smoking tobacco products and abusing alcohol.

- Stress.

Certain health conditions increase the risk of hypertension. These include:

- High cholesterol.

- Heart disease.

- Kidney disease.

Though some people are at a higher risk of developing hypertension, anyone at any age can develop high blood pressure.

People who have a family history of hypertension are more likely to develop the condition. African-Americans are also more likely to have hypertension.

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Complications of Hypertension

Over time, high blood pressure can damage blood vessels throughout the body.

High blood pressure can cause blood vessels to widen and become weaker. This can lead to an abnormal widening of the blood vessels, which is called an aneurysm.

Aneurysms can bleed and cause death, especially when they are located in the blood vessels of the brain or the aorta. The aorta is the largest blood vessel in the body.

Over time, blood vessels become narrower from the buildup of cholesterol and other debris. The muscles of the arteries can thicken due to high blood pressure, which can cause this narrowing.

Narrow blood vessels restrict and may even block the flow of blood. This lack of blood supply can cause damage to the organs in the body.

The blockage of arteries in the brain can lead to a stroke. Strokes can lead to paralysis, speech problems and death.

Blockage of blood vessels in the kidneys can lead to kidney failure. Kidney failure is the inability of the kidneys to remove poisons from the blood.

Kidney failure can lead to death unless patients receive dialysis treatment. During dialysis, patients are hooked up to a machine 3 to 5 times a week for 4 hours at a time to clean their blood.

Blockage of blood vessels in the eye can lead to vision problems and blindness.

The blockage of an artery that supplies the heart with blood may lead to a heart attack. This weakens the heart and may lead to death.

High blood pressure can cause the heart to get tired from pumping blood at such high pressure. This is known as heart failure. It can result in breathing problems and death.

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There is a higher chance of developing complications of high blood pressure if the patient has other medical conditions, such as:

- Diabetes.

- High cholesterol.

- Obesity.

- Previous strokes or heart attacks.

Diagnosing Hypertension

The damage to blood vessels that is caused by high blood pressure may take years to develop. During that time, patients with hypertension may not have any symptoms.

Even though most patients feel no symptoms when their blood pressure rises to an abnormally high level, some patients with hypertension suffer from headaches or fatigue.

The only way to detect hypertension early enough to prevent serious complications is by checking your blood pressure regularly. A health care provider can help check for hypertension.

Health care providers use an inflatable arm cuff to measure blood pressure. The cuff is placed around the patient's arm. This test takes a couple of minutes and it is painless.

Health care providers will also ask questions about the patient's medical history. A physical exam will be done.

A patient is diagnosed with high blood pressure if repeated tests show that their blood pressure is consistently high.

Controlling Hypertension

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High blood pressure can be controlled with lifestyle changes and medical treatment.

Controlling hypertension involves a lifelong commitment to healthy eating and lifestyle habits. Medications may also be needed to bring high blood pressure back to normal.

Regular follow-up care with a health care provider is also essential to make sure that hypertension is controlled. A health care provider can also check for signs of complications.

Losing weight, exercising and eating a healthier diet are usually all that patients need to do to bring their blood pressure levels back to normal.

Eating a diet that is low in salt and fat can help control high blood pressure.

The words salt, sodium, and Na on food labels all mean salt. Your health care provider may recommend a reduced sodium diet. Talk with your health care provider about how much sodium is right for you.

Eating less fat not only helps people lose weight and keep blood pressure levels normal, but it also helps prevent heart attacks and strokes not related to hypertension.

Aerobic exercise also helps people reduce blood pressure as well as lose weight. It helps improve heart performance and decreases the chance of having a heart attack.

Walking, biking and swimming are all examples of aerobic exercise. Check with your health care provider before you begin an exercise program.

Quitting smoking if you smoke and drinking less alcohol can help control your blood pressure. Finding ways to control stress can also help. Stress can be managed through exercise and relaxation techniques such as meditation.

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Summary

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a common condition that affects 1 out of every 3 adults. Hypertension can lead to severe health problems if it goes untreated for a long time.

The exact causes of hypertension are not known. But certain risk factors are associated with high blood pressure. Though some people have a higher risk of developing hypertension, anyone at any age can develop high blood pressure.

Risk factors for high blood pressure include:

- Being overweight.

- Eating a diet that is high in salt and fat.

- Lack of physical activity.

- Smoking tobacco products and abusing alcohol.

- Stress.

Over time, high blood pressure can damage blood vessels throughout the body. The damage to blood vessels that is caused by high blood pressure may take years to develop. During that time, patients suffering from hypertension may not have any symptoms.

The only way to detect hypertension early enough to prevent serious complications is by checking your blood pressure levels regularly. A patient is diagnosed with high blood pressure if repeated tests show that their blood pressure is consistently high.

High blood pressure can be controlled with lifestyle changes and medical treatment. Controlling hypertension means a lifelong commitment to healthy lifestyle habits. Medications may also be needed to bring high blood pressure back to normal.

Regular follow-up care with a health care provider is also needed to make sure that hypertension is controlled. A health care provider can check for signs of complications.

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