

Hypertension

“Say to him: ‘Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours.’” 1 Samuel 25:6

High blood pressure is another word for hypertension. To understand hypertension, first we need to understand what the term blood pressure means. Simply put, the heart pumps the blood through our blood vessels, and our **blood pressure** is the force that this flow creates on those blood vessels. It’s similar to the air in your car’s tires; too much pressure is not good. Blood pressure is measured with two numbers, systolic over diastolic. The systolic is the top number representing the pressure on the arteries when the heart beats. The diastolic pressure, or bottom number, is that force as the heart relaxes between beats.

Normal blood pressure is categorized as follows:

Normal: Less than 120/80

Prehypertension: 120-139/80-89

Stage 1 hypertension: 140-159/90-99

Stage 2 hypertension: 160 and above/100 and above.

There are often no symptoms when a person’s blood pressure is elevated. It is believed that a third of all people who have high blood pressure are not aware of it. The only way to know is to have it checked. However, when blood pressure is very elevated, there may be symptoms that should not be ignored. These might include a bad headache, fatigue, confusion, problems with vision, chest pain, difficulty breathing, an irregular heartbeat, or blood in the urine.

About 5% of all people with high blood pressure have a narrowing of certain arteries or a structural problem with a kidney. However, there is usually no clear cut cause of hypertension, although several factors can contribute to this condition. Being African American increases the risk of high blood pressure. Obesity, advanced age, a lack of exercise, a poor diet, and genetics all contribute to the development of hypertension. Smoking, extra salt in the diet, stress, and alcohol intake all increase the likelihood of having high blood pressure.

Untreated high blood pressure affects a number of the body’s organs. It can lead to kidney failure, a stroke, angina and/or heart attack, hardening of the arteries, congestive heart failure, and vision problems.

The diagnosis of hypertension is based on high readings taken on several different occasions. A person with readings consistently over 140/90 would be considered hypertensive, and should begin treatment.

Treatment options should include a change in lifestyle, as well as medications. By losing weight, not smoking, eating a healthy diet, limiting alcohol intake, and getting regular exercise, blood pressure can show a dramatic improvement. Medications are also of great value, and there are a large number of them to choose from. Some people will stop their medications because of side effects, or simply because they “don’t like to take pills.” This is a life-threatening decision that is never the right one! Allow a doctor to monitor and adjust medications until you find the correct one for you. Losing weight or other changes in your habits may allow you to get off medications completely, but this is a step that cannot be made without your doctor’s knowledge and direction. Many people monitor their blood pressure at home, and this is a wonderful tool to make sure your blood pressure is under control.

Take charge of your health, and keep your blood pressure under control with the help of your doctor and a healthy lifestyle!

For more information, check out:

www.webmd.com (search hypertension)

www.nhlbi.nih.gov (search heart and vascular diseases)