

- Blood pressure

Why you shouldn't dismiss hypertension symptoms as stress

One in four Indians has high blood pressure, leaving them susceptible to Covid-19 and other illnesses. Here's how you can keep hypertension in check

The Times of India (New Delhi edition) · 17 May 2021 · 12 · TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Dr Hemant Gupta's foremost prescription for hypertension is a relaxed mind. But recent studies — which have found high blood pressure to be the most common pre-existing condition among those hospitalised for Covid-19 — make that a tough prescription to follow. Dr Gupta, a professor at Grant Medical College, JJ Hospital, has noticed many hypertensive patients walk into his clinic in a state of panic and “emotional stress” of late. “They say someone in the family or in the neighbourhood has tested positive and that they are worried,” says Dr Gupta, who knows better than to prescribe tablets for such situations, in which the patient's blood pressure tends to be high. Instead, he sits them down, allays their fears in his calmest voice and watches the number on their BP monitor stabilise in a matter of days.

World Hypertension Day — globally observed on May 17 — has turned the spotlight back on a chronic condition deemed a “silent killer” in India. Last year, a study by India Hypertension Control Initiative (IHCI) — a multi-partner initiative that implements public health hypertension control programmes across India — showed that one in four adults has high blood pressure. Worse still, among people with high blood pressure, only half have been diagnosed, according to recent studies that peg “systemic hypertension” as a major risk factor for cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases, accounting for 24% of heart attacks and more than 10% of deaths in India. If left untreated, hypertension, doctors say, can cause artery stiffening and lead to increased risk of a stroke, as well as kidney and brain damage.

To explain how age makes people susceptible to hypertension, Dr Gupta has this analogy. He likens blood vessels to bathroom pipes. “If I've bought a new pipe, water will fall into the bucket. If the pipe is old, water will fall at a distance from the bucket. This is because the surface of the pipe has become stiff or impurities have collected inside it, which obstructs the flow,” he says. However, the widespread prevalence of factors such as stress means that these bodily pipes can be “obliterated” from the outside which, in turn, means that the condition isn't limited to age anymore. “It affects everyone from school kids to the elderly,” says Dr Gupta.

While the overt symptoms like short temper, irritability, breathlessness and chest pain are easy to detect, hypertension is also often ignored as stress. “The largest symptom is

silence,” says Dr Hemant Thacker, a consultant physician and cardio-metabolic specialist, referring to the quiet nature of the condition.

“I’ve come across patients who say they don’t have high BP but when I check their BP, it touches 150/100 mmHg,” says Dr Thacker, adding that the normal range is less than 120/80 mmHg.

The longer this condition is left untreated, the weaker the immune system becomes, which is a risk factor for Covid-19. For those with a strong genetic predisposition to this non-communicable disease, which is classified as a lifestyle disorder, Dr Thacker advises regular blood pressure checks, keeping away from cigarettes and alcohol and reducing stress while Dr Gupta advises exercise, yoga, spending time with family and pursuing fun activities that increase the level of “happy” hormones such as dopamine. They also advise hypertensive patients to keep away from pickles and packaged fried foods that tend to be high in sodium. “While salt is the oxygen of the muscle and the heart is a muscle, excess salt intake should be avoided,” says Dr Gupta, revealing a vital prescription that many Indians take with a pinch of salt.