- Hypertension

TIPS FOR BETTER BLOOD PRESSURE

5 steps to get your blood pressure under control

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In the United States, nearly half of adults have high blood pressure. Known as a “silent killer”, hypertension can contribute to heart attack, stroke and heart failure without ever causing symptoms.



Where hypertension was once thought to affect mostly older people, research now shows that an increasing share of people ages 35 to 64 are dying of heart disease related to it.

“Hypertension matters so much because it’s the most modifiable risk factor for cardiovascular disease, stroke and now, the evidence suggests, this may be true for cognitive decline,” said Dr Eduardo Sanchez, chief medical officer for prevention at the American Heart Association.

Lifestyle changes and medication can help bring blood pressure down, which “changes the trajectory very, very dramatically” when it comes to heart attack and stroke, he added.

Even simple steps can help get your blood pressure in check.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

It sounds obvious, but just knowing your blood pressure is a great place to start. More than half of people with uncontrolled hypertension aren’t aware they have it, according to some estimates.

Blood pressure, the force that blood exerts on your arterial walls, is measured in millimetres of mercury (mm Hg). It is given in two numbers. The top number, systolic pressure, measures the force when blood is pumped out of your heart. The bottom number, diastolic pressure, measures the force between beats, when your heart is filling with blood.

Normal blood pressure is below 120 mm Hg over 80 mm Hg. Above that level, Sanchez said, damage begins to occur to blood vessels and organs they supply, including the kidneys, heart and brain.

It’s important to have your blood pressure checked at least annually, said Dr Jennifer Cluett, director of the Complex Hypertension Clinic at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston. Make sure it’s measured the right way, with the right size cuff and when you are sitting with both feet flat on the floor, have your upper arm supported at heart level and are not talking.

Up to 30% of patients also may experience “white coat hypertension”, when blood pressure levels are elevated at the doctor’s office. For this reason, blood pressure management guidelines recommend checking at home, too, to confirm a diagnosis and manage the condition.

UNDERSTAND YOUR PERSONAL RISK

There can be many causes of hypertension, said Dr Fatima Coronado, associate director for science in the division for heart disease and stroke prevention of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It develops over time as a result of both genetic and environmental factors, including smoking, excess weight and poor sleep.

People whose parent or grandparent suffered a heart attack or stroke can be at increased genetic risk for high blood pressure, Coronado said.

Age influences risk because our arteries stiffen as we get older. Hypertension is also more prevalent among black people and men than among white people and women.

Some women develop high blood pressure during pregnancy, which can be dangerous to the mother and foetus. Dr Martha Gulati, director of the Davis Women's Heart Center at Houston Methodist, said that the condition should be treated during pregnancy and women should be followed by a cardiologist afterwards because they are at increased risk of high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease.

FOLLOW A HEART-HEALTHY DIET

You've heard it before: Eat healthy for your heart. Specifically, the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, or DASH, diet was found to be the most effective of 22 lifestyle changes and stress-reducing techniques at reducing blood pressure, according to an analysis of more than 100 studies.

One reason may be that it centres foods rich in potassium, an electrolyte that helps your body get rid of sodium and that relaxes your artery walls. Sodium causes the body to retain water, increasing the fluid and pressure inside blood vessels.

Bananas aren't the only easy source of potassium; one avocado or a cup of diced cantaloupe contain even more of it, and citrus fruits such as oranges and leafy greens such as spinach and Swiss chard are also rich in the electrolyte.

You can lower your blood pressure further if, in combination with DASH, you also reduce your sodium intake, Gulati said.

The American Heart Association recommends that people consume no more than 2,300mg of sodium per day — and ideally, much less. In the United States, most of the sodium in people's diets comes from restaurant meals and processed foods.

Cutting down on these foods — swapping a frozen dinner or a slice of pizza for the salad bar, for example — or making small changes in your food shopping can make a big difference. Look for low-sodium versions of sauces. Rinse canned beans and vegetables, which are often stored in salty water for preservation, before eating.

Alcohol intake is also associated with increased blood pressure. Doctors suggest aiming for total abstinence. The benefits of cutting back seem greatest for those who consume more than two drinks per day.

THE DIETARY APPROACHES TO STOP HYPERTENSION, OR DASH, DIET WAS FOUND TO BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE

GET MOVING AND RELEASE STRESS

Aerobic exercise, which strengthens your heart so it can pump with less effort, was the second-most-effective intervention, after the DASH diet. Isometric resistance exercise — when you contract muscles and hold a position, as in a wall squat and plank — was the third. Isometric exercise may help blood vessels dilate, which improves blood flow.

Exercise can also reduce stress, as can meditation and yoga. Other kinds of prayer and religious practice may also reduce stress, Sanchez said.

And while exercise is beneficial even if you don't lose weight, Cluett said, dropping excess kilos can also reduce blood pressure.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF MEDICATION

The goal of treatment is to keep blood pressure below 130/80 mm Hg, though less than 120/80 mm Hg is even better. Often, that requires medication. There are several effective, generic options doctors can prescribe.

Patients may need to take multiple types, which doctors said can sometimes be a deterrent. Single-pill combinations that include two or more blood pressure medications in one tablet make them easier to take. While some medications can cause side effects such as frequent urination or leg swelling, doctors can tweak drug regimens to mitigate those.

Even if you're on medication, changes to your diet and exercise can still help — and lower your odds of all sorts of negative health outcomes.

"Lifestyle changes help more than just your blood pressure number," Cluett said.