

High Blood Pressure (Hypertension)

Definition

Blood pressure is the measure of the pressure inside of the arteries and heart. Having high blood pressure or hypertension means that the pressure is too high for the heart to function normally. The arteries and heart will be damaged if the blood pressure remains high over a long period.

Blood pressure is a measure of two numbers, one above the other (ex: 120/80). The top number (systolic pressure) is a measure of the pressure in the arteries when the heart beats. The bottom number (diastolic pressure) measures the pressure in the arteries when the heart is resting in preparation to beat again.

A normal blood pressure is 120/80 or less. Blood pressure is considered high when the systolic pressure is 140-159 and the diastolic pressure is 90-99.

Early signs and symptoms

There are two types of high blood pressure. Primary hypertension occurs with no clear cause. Secondary hypertension occurs in addition to other long-term health problems such as sleep apnea, heart conditions, thyroid, adrenal gland or kidney problems, certain prescription drugs and illegal drugs (cocaine, amphetamines). Most often people do not know they have high blood pressure and rarely experience symptoms.

Risk factors for high blood pressure include:

- Age: Blood pressure usually increases as people get older.
- Race: African Americans experience high blood pressure at a younger age than other races.
- Family History: High blood pressure sometimes run in families or has a genetic component.
- Overweight: Being overweight requires more blood to flow through the body. Needing more blood can also mean having higher blood pressure.
- Physical Activity: Being less physically active can make your heart need to pump harder which raises the blood pressure.
- Tobacco Use: Tobacco products can damage the lining of the arteries causing them to narrow (also called atherosclerosis). When the heart tries to force the same volume of blood through smaller arteries the blood pressure increases.
- Salty foods: Eating foods high in salt or sodium can cause the body to retain fluid which raises blood pressure.
- Stress: Emotional stress can cause serious physical problems. Stress temporarily raises blood pressure. If you use food or tobacco to relax you may be increasing your risk of developing high blood pressure.

Treatment

High blood pressure is typically managed with making lifestyle changes or medication. Lifestyle changes that can help reduce blood pressure include making healthy food choices low in salt and getting more exercise. Medication used to reduce blood pressure are sometimes called “water pills” which reduce the volume of blood by increasing excretion of fluids. Medication regimens need to be followed closely for them to be most effective. Erratic usages of medication may not lower blood pressure to the desired level.

Resources

Check out this link for a complete list of blood pressure ranges.

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/AboutHighBloodPressure/Understanding-Blood-Pressure-Readings_UCM_301764_Article.jsp#.V98DhI5THIU

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/high-blood-pressure/basics/definition/con-20019580>