High Blood Pressure...The Silent Killer

by Evan C. Ray, MD, PhD, FASN

Blood pressure is a measure of the force of blood against a person’s arteries as the heart pumps blood through the body. High blood pressure—also called hypertension—is associated with increased risk of heart attacks, strokes and kidney disease. High blood pressure reduces the risks of these health problems. However, many people have high blood pressure.

What causes high blood pressure? About one-third of all people in the United States have high blood pressure. But African Americans are even more likely to experience high blood pressure. Nearly two-thirds of people over age 60 have high blood pressure. This means that people who have the American Heart Association state that a healthy blood pressure is 120/80 mmHg or less. This means even more people are now considered to have high blood pressure. Elevated blood pressure is the most common problem addressed in primary care doctors’ offices.

What are the symptoms of high blood pressure? Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms until they experience a heart attack, stroke or kidney failure. Over 60 people in the United States with high blood pressure are unknown.

What causes high blood pressure? The way people eat has a dramatic effect on blood pressure. Research shows that too much sodium in the diet is associated with elevated blood pressure. The Food and Drug Administration recommends limiting sodium intake to 2.3 grams per day. Although the American Heart Association recommends even less, the average American eats much more than this. Processed foods and food from restaurants, especially fast foods, are high in sodium and low in potassium. Although many people are aware that sodium can cause high blood pressure, they may not know that too little potassium also raises blood pressure. This finding suggests that potassium deficiency could be the most common nutritional deficiency in the United States. Researchers in the renal-electrolyte division at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine are currently working to better understand how potassium influences blood pressure.

Other conditions that influence blood pressure include obesity, diabetes and smoking. Obesity and diabetes increase blood pressure. The American Heart Association recommends fewer than 100 calories of saturated fat each day. Exercise that is vigorous enough to cause sweating lowers blood pressure. Research has shown that for every 20 pounds lost, blood pressure decreases by 10 mmHg—similar to the decrease with some blood pressure medications. Finally, an active lifestyle with regular exercise can reduce blood pressure. When these measures fail to lower blood pressure enough, medication may be necessary. Dated blood pressure affects most people in the United States as they age. Preventing or treating high blood pressure reduces the risk of heart attacks, strokes and kidney disease. It is important to see a doctor regularly to make sure blood pressure is under control.

How can high blood pressure be prevented or controlled? Healthy eating is one of the best ways to prevent or treat high blood pressure. Eating less sodium and more potassium can improve blood pressure as much as being on medications. Although people with high blood pressure should be more sensitive to sodium. This makes it even more important for African Americans to eat a healthy diet, rich in fruits and vegetables, with limited sodium.

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