

HYPERTENSION: Information for the Patient



What is hypertension?

Hypertension is also known as high blood pressure and occurs when the blood pressing on the inside of the arteries (blood vessels) is higher than normal. Untreated hypertension can have serious consequences including a higher risk for heart attacks, strokes, or kidney problems. Because people with hypertension often do not feel sick, it is sometimes referred to as the "silent killer."

What causes hypertension?

The cause of hypertension for most people is unknown, but we do know that there are some things that that can increase your risk, such as:

- ❖ Family history of hypertension
- ❖ High cholesterol
- ❖ Diabetes
- ❖ Smoking
- ❖ Being over 60 years old

Measuring hypertension

There are two numbers referred to when measuring a person's blood pressure, the "systolic" or top number and the "diastolic" or bottom number. In a blood pressure of 120/80, the 120 is the systolic number and 80 is the diastolic number. When saying a blood pressure, the word "over" is used to replace the slash. For example, the above blood pressure would be "120 over 80."

A person is said to have hypertension when the systolic number OR the diastolic number is higher than the "goal" blood pressure. The goals for your blood pressure are set depending on your other risk factors such as diabetes or kidney disease. In general, a good systolic number is less than 120 and a good diastolic number is less than 80. Your doctor can tell you what is normal for you and what your "goal" is.

What can be done to treat hypertension?

Hypertension is usually treated with lifestyle changes first, then with medications if these are not enough. Lifestyle changes to help lower your blood pressure include:

- Decreasing your caffeine intake
- Losing weight if you are overweight
- Learning to control your stress such as using relaxation tapes or counseling
- Quit smoking
- Exercising three or more times a week (if your doctor says it is OK)
- Eating healthy foods low in fat and salt
- Do not drink more than two alcoholic beverages a day

There are many different types of medicines used to treat hypertension. They are often referred to as 'antihypertensives' and all of them require a doctor's prescription. Most of these medications are taken just once a day and have few side effects.

If you need to take medicine for hypertension, you will probably need to take it for the rest of your life. Also, many people will need more than one of these medications to get to their "goal" blood pressure.

Antihypertensive medications

- ❖ *Diuretics*—sometimes called "water pills," these drugs help your body get rid of extra sodium and fluid (examples: HCTZ, spironolactone, furosemide)
- ❖ *Beta blockers*—these drugs block the effects of adrenaline in the body (examples: atenolol, metoprolol)
- ❖ *Alpha blockers*—help blood vessels to stay open wider (examples: doxazosin, terazosin)
- ❖ *ACE Inhibitors*—prevent blood vessels from constricting (getting smaller) by blocking a substance produced in the blood (examples: captopril, lisinopril)
- ❖ *ARBs*—like ACE inhibitors, but may have less side effects (examples: Avapro®, Cozaar®, Diovan®)
- ❖ *Calcium channel blockers*—prevent blood vessels from constricting by blocking calcium from entering the cells (nifedipine, Norvasc®)

What are the possible side effects of these medications?

Although most people do well taking antihypertensives, some people will have side effects, including:

- Feeling dizzy when standing up
- Lower levels of potassium in the blood
- Drowsiness
- Dry mouth
- Constipation

Many of these side effects will go away within 1 to 2 weeks of starting the medication, but some will not. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you think you are having side effects from your medication; a switch to a different medicine may be all that is needed.

What you can do:

It is important to realize that hypertension can almost always be treated to the "goal" level with few, if any, side effects. For more information about hypertension, call or write the following organizations:

American Heart Association National Center
7272 Greenville Avenue
Dallas, TX 75231-4596
Phone: 1-800-242-8721
Web Address: <http://www.americanheart.org>

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute
Health Information Center
P.O. Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105
Phone: 1-301-592-8573
Web Address:
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/infoctr/index.htm>