

HYPERTENSION

(High Blood Pressure)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

An increase in the force against arteries (blood vessels) as blood circulates through them. Hypertension is sometimes called “the silent killer” because it often has no symptoms until the late stages. Blood pressure normally goes up as a result of stress or physical activity, but a person with hypertension has high blood pressure at rest.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Usually no symptoms unless disease is severe. Following are symptoms of a hypertensive crisis:

- Headache; drowsiness; confusion.
- Numbness and tingling in the hands and feet.
- Coughing blood; nosebleeds.
- Severe shortness of breath.

CAUSES

Usually unknown. A small number of cases result from:

- Chronic kidney disease.
- Severe narrowing of the aorta (major artery of the heart).
- Disorders of some endocrine glands.
- Hardening of the arteries.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Adults over 60.
- Obesity; smoking; stress.
- Alcoholism.
- Diet that is high in salt or saturated fat.
- Sedentary lifestyle.
- Genetic factors. Hypertension is most common among blacks.
- Family history of hypertension, stroke, heart attack or kidney failure.
- Use of contraceptive pills, steroids and some appetite suppressants or decongestants.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Essential hypertension (from unknown causes) cannot be prevented at present. If you have a family history of hypertension, obtain frequent blood-pressure checks.
- If hypertension is detected early, treatment that includes diet, exercise, stress management, smoking cessation, alcohol reduction, and medication can usually prevent complications.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- With treatment, complications are preventable (except for possible side effects of drugs). Life expectancy is near normal.
- Without treatment, life expectancy is reduced because of the likelihood of heart attack or stroke.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Stroke.
- Heart attack.
- Congestive heart failure and pulmonary edema.
- Kidney failure.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests may include laboratory studies of blood; ECG (electrocardiogram—method of diagnosing heart diseases by measuring electrical activity of the heart), angiography (study of arteries and veins by injecting material into them that X-rays can outline) and other X-rays.
- Overall treatment goals will be individualized and may involve weight loss; smoking cessation; exercise program; reduction in alcohol consumption; and lifestyle changes to reduce stress.
- Learn to take your own blood pressure and monitor it daily.

MEDICATIONS

- Antihypertensive medications can reduce blood pressure if more conservative measures don't work.
- Don't take non-prescription cold and sinus remedies. These contain drugs, such as ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, that raise blood pressure.

ACTIVITY

Normal activity with exercise program at least 3 times a week. This helps reduce stress and maintain normal body weight; it may lower blood pressure. Seek medical advice (from your doctor or an exercise physiologist) about an exercise prescription.

DIET

- Low-salt diet.
- Reducing diet if overweight.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of a hypertensive crisis.
- Chest pain occurs. This may be an emergency. Seek help immediately!
- Symptoms of high-blood pressure continue despite treatment.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects.