Understanding Your Blood Pressure

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Most of us are familiar with blood pressure since it is a common test done when we visit the doctor. Although it is a test we have all had, many people don’t really understand what their blood pressure readings mean or realize the significant problems high blood pressure (hypertension) can cause. According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, one in three adults, nearly 65 million Americans, have high blood pressure. Nearly 20 percent of Americans are unaware they have high blood pressure. The risk for high blood pressure increases with age beginning in the mid 40’s. Men and women over 60 years old have a 50 percent greater risk of developing high blood pressure, and those who are overweight or have a family history are at the greatest risk.

Hypertension is often called a "silent killer" since it typically has no symptoms or warning signs. Even though your blood pressure is high, you often don't feel poorly even though damage is taking place within the body. Those with high blood pressure, whether they know it or not, are at an increased risk for heart attack, stroke, heart failure and kidney disease. Since high blood pressure has such a detrimental impact on our health, we need to have a greater understanding of what blood pressure is, what blood pressure numbers mean and make sure to monitor it on a regular basis in order to prevent the devastating damage it can cause.

Blood pressure is a measure of the force pushing outward on the walls of the arteries. A blood pressure reading consists of two numbers. The first number, referred to as the systolic measurement, is the higher number and is the measurement of the force created when the heart contracts and pumps the blood into the arteries. The second number, the diastolic measurement, is the lower number, and is the measurement of the pressure in the blood vessels when the heart is resting between beats.

Your posture, health, activity and especially stress can cause your blood pressure to fluctuate. In order to get the most accurate reading, make sure you are relaxed and not talking for a few minutes before taking your blood pressure. Have both feet on the ground and support the arm you are taking the measurement from so the arm is relaxed. Avoid caffeine and exercise for at least 30 minutes before taking your blood pressure. Many people experience stress and anxiety when going to the doctor. These people can suffer from “white coat syndrome,” which is where their blood pressure reading is higher when taken at the doctor’s office. In fact, some studies say not to trust readings taken at the doctor’s office, as they are typically higher. Monitoring your own blood pressure on a regular basis in your own home or pharmacy is often the best way to determine your true blood pressure. It is best to take an average of at least three different readings. Keep a log of your readings over several days and bring the log with you to your doctor.

A healthy range for blood pressure readings is between 90 over 60 (90/60) and 120 over 80 (120/80). If your blood pressure is more than 120 over 80 and less than 140 over 90 (120/80-140/90)you have a normal blood pressure reading, but it is considered within the higher range of normal and you should take measures to lower it. When your blood pressure reading is140 over 90 (140/90) or higher for several readings over a few week period, it is considered high blood pressure (hypertension) and needs to be addressed.

The medical approach to lowering blood pressure typically includes antihypertensive medications. These medications work in a variety of ways, but they don’t cure high blood pressure. The good news is there are many natural steps you can take that will often bring blood pressure back into normal ranges without medication. The first place to begin is with your diet.

Avoiding high-inflammatory foods, such as gluten, dairy, sugar, artificial sweeteners, soy, corn and peanuts, is critical when you have hypertension. Many packaged foods include these inflammatory ingredients. Packaged and processed food, as well as restaurant food, is also high in sodium, which can contribute to high blood pressure. Cook your meals at home and focus on eating vegetables, lean meats and a moderate amount of fruit to help reduce inflammation.

Magnesium is one of the top nutrients to help with lowering blood pressure, especially in older men. One study found that out of 615 men, those that consumed the most magnesium in their diet consistently had lower blood pressure. Researchers believe we need at least 500mg of magnesium a day just to replace what we lose from stress, excess alcohol, perspiration, diuretics and sugar. The best foods sources of magnesium include dark green leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds, salmon, halibut, avocado and dark chocolate. Other foods that help lower blood pressure include garlic, flaxseed, olive oil and beets. Beans, bananas and potatoes can be beneficial when eaten in moderation (once or twice a week).

Lifestyle changes, including exercising for 30 minutes a day 5 days a week, losing weight, quitting smoking and reducing stress can all help lower blood pressure. Although diet and lifestyle are the most important steps to naturally lower blood pressure, supplements such as magnesium, CoQ10, potassium, vitamin E, fish oil and resveratrol can also be helpful.

High blood pressure can have a detrimental impact on our health, yet many times it can be controlled through natural steps. Don’t let this silent killer sneak up on you. Make sure to monitor your blood pressure on a regular basis, eat healthy foods, and make the lifestyle changes necessary to keep your blood pressure in a healthy range.