

(September 1998 *Today's Supervisor*, a publication by the National Safety Council, Itasca, IL)

## High Blood Pressure: The Silent Killer

High blood pressure is a silent killer—it often gives no warning signs or symptoms to the one in four American adults who have it, and a third of the 50 million Americans who have it don't know it. In fact, people may not find out they have it until they have trouble with their heart, brain or kidneys.

High blood pressure increases a person's chance of having a heart attack or stroke and of getting kidney disease. It plays a role in 700,000 deaths a year, and the illnesses brought on by uncontrolled high blood pressure cost Americans billions of dollars a year.

### What is high blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against artery walls. It's recorded as two numbers. Systolic pressure is the force when the heart beats (the higher number); diastolic pressure is the force when the heart is at rest. Blood pressure is considered high when the level is 140/90 mm Hg or above, on a consistent basis. The only way to measure blood pressure is with an instrument called a sphygmomanometer, which is quick, easy and painless.

### What causes high blood pressure?

In 90-95 percent of the cases of high blood pressure, the cause is unknown. This type is called "essential hypertension." Though it can't be cured, it can be controlled in most cases. In the remaining cases, high blood pressure is a symptom of a recognizable underlying problem, such as a kidney abnormality or a tumor of the adrenal gland. This is called "secondary hypertension" and is usually cured when its root cause is corrected.

### Who's at risk for getting this disease?

Several factors increase the chance that a person will develop high blood pressure:

- Heredity (A person is more likely to develop high blood pressure if his parents or other close relatives had it.)
- Diet high in salt
- Obesity
- Heavy alcohol consumption (Michael J. Hogan, MD, a consultant in hypertension and internal medicine at the Mayo Clinic, says that "Two drinks a day is the breaking point-when alcohol consumption exceeds that, blood pressure goes up.")
- Sedentary or inactive lifestyle
- Race (African Americans are more likely to have high blood pressure than white Americans.)
- Male sex
- Age (The older a person gets, the higher blood pressure tends to be.)

## What can be done to treat high blood pressure?

Because medical science doesn't understand the causes of most cases of high blood pressure, it's hard to say how to prevent it. Still, several steps can be taken to control it. A physician should be consulted when high blood pressure persists. Treatment consists of lifestyle changes and medication; a doctor may recommend one or both forms of treatment. With lifestyle changes, a person may be able to lower his blood pressure without taking medicine. The American Academy of Family Physicians says more than 80 different medicines are available to treat high blood pressure, and more than 90 percent of patients with hypertension get good results from antihypertensive medicines if they follow their doctor's instructions.

Even though heredity, race, sex and age can't be changed, everyone can take action to lower his chance of developing high blood pressure:

- Maintain a healthy weight, or lose weight if overweight;
- Increase aerobic physical activity (30 to 45 minutes most days of the week);
- Eat healthfully (choose foods lower in calories and salt);
- Drink alcoholic beverages in moderation, if at all; and
- Do not smoke.

## What can be done at work to lower high blood pressure?

Establish regular blood pressure screenings, so employees can learn their blood pressure. "Make sure employees feel comfortable and that the information is confidential," says Beth Reitz, director of community health services at Chesapeake (Virginia) General Hospital. Some employees don't want employers to know they have high blood pressure for fear of losing their jobs. "Make sure they know you're there to help them—not to take their job away," says Reitz.

Teach employees how to manage stress. Stress is known to raise blood pressure, but its long-term affects are not yet well understood. Still, some of the traditional methods for managing stress, such as losing weight and exercising, are good habits for overall good health. Ruth Verick, a senior billing representative at UMass Memorial Hospital who has high blood pressure, says the easiest way to control stress at work is through deep breathing exercises. "Just close your eyes and take deep breaths," she says. "Some people stare at their computers while they're doing this, and people think they're working."

Encourage healthful eating. Five years ago, Len Andreozzi, a senior program manager at Ball Aerospace in Boulder, Colo., had blood pressure of 190/120. After two heart attacks and open heart surgery, he has learned the benefits of healthful eating. "I used to be a meat and potatoes guy—now I eat rabbit food," he says. "I'm very uncomfortable with heavy meals and high fat food now. But I do allow myself a treat once in a while." His blood pressure is down to a healthy 120/80.

Encourage exercise during lunch and breaks. Dr. Hogan of the Mayo Clinic suggests starting out with walking 15 minutes a day and adding a house each day. "Over four weeks, you'll get to where you're walking 30 minutes, five days a week," he says.

Establish a wellness program. Organizations like the American Heart Association offer comprehensive wellness programs that help employees make lifestyle changes and lower their blood pressure.

### **What's the bottom line?**

High blood pressure can be controlled, but it can seldom be cured. By following treatment prescribed by a physician, the risk of stroke, heart disease and kidney failure can be reduced. All employees should keep track of their blood pressure and keep it under control.