

Disease Risks of High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure increases your chance (or risk) for getting heart disease and/or kidney disease, and for having a stroke. It is especially dangerous because it often has no warning signs or symptoms. Regardless of race, age, or gender, anyone can develop high blood pressure. It is estimated that one in every four American adults has high blood pressure. Once high blood pressure develops, it usually lasts a lifetime. You can prevent and control high blood pressure by taking action.

Special Concerns

Certain people need to pay special attention to their blood pressure. Finding out about their high blood pressure and taking care of it is doubly important for them:

Birth Control Pills: If you're a woman taking birth control pills, you may find that your blood pressure goes up slightly. Studies have shown that women taking birth control pills for more than five years have higher blood pressure than do those who don't take them. But for most women, the increase doesn't go above normal.

Women whose blood pressure rises too much should switch to another form of birth control. Once off birth control pills, they should find their blood pressure returns to normal within a few months.

Women over age 35 who take birth control pills and smoke cigarettes run an increased risk of developing high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems. Of course, all smokers should quit. If you keep smoking while taking birth control pills, you should change your method of birth control.

Older People: Studies have shown that older people, like younger people, who are treated for high blood pressure, live longer, healthier lives. They benefit even if their blood pressure is only slightly above normal before they start treatment. Treatments for the elderly with high blood pressure are the same as those for younger adults: lifestyle changes, medicine, or a combination of both.

African Americans: High blood pressure happens more often among African Americans than whites. It starts at an earlier age and usually is more severe. And African Americans have a higher death rate from stroke and kidney problems than whites. Treatment can control their high blood pressure. The key is to control the risk factors for high blood pressure. These include being overweight, diabetes, lack of enough physical activity, and eating foods high in sodium or low in potassium. Lifestyle changes often are enough to control these factors and prevent the condition altogether.

Diabetes: People who have high blood pressure and either form of diabetes also have an increased risk of heart and kidney problems and stroke. They usually have high blood cholesterol, too. There are two types of diabetes: noninsulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) and insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (IDDM). NIDDM is the most common form. It can often be controlled following a specific meal plan and increasing physical activity. In some cases, insulin or a pill may also be needed. Injecting insulin as well as following a specific eating and activity plan controls IDDM.

To treat both your high blood pressure and your diabetes, you'll probably be asked to make some changes in what you eat. You should eat more foods low in salt and sodium, saturated fat, and cholesterol, small portions of poultry, fish and lean meats, more fruits and vegetables, as well as low-fat or nonfat dairy products and whole grain breads and cereals. If you're overweight, you'll need to watch your calories as well. If your blood pressure doesn't lower to 130/85 mm Hg, you may also need to take some medicine.

High Blood Cholesterol Levels: Having both high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol is common, and the first line of treatment for both conditions is to change your lifestyle. This includes losing weight if you're overweight (eating fewer calories while getting more exercise), eating less saturated fat and cholesterol, and cutting back on sodium. If these changes don't lower your blood pressure and cholesterol enough, then you may need to take medicine.

Source: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute - <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>