



## Lowering high blood pressure can improve health



Elevated blood pressure, or hypertension, is the primary cause of stroke, kidney failure and congestive heart failure and a major determinant of heart attack, dementia (loss of memory) and eye and neurological (nerve) complications of diabetes. All adults should know their BP levels and be familiar with the recommended goals for their BP. The systolic BP, or upper level, is generally more important among older individuals. The systolic BP increases with age because the arteries get stiffer with aging and disease.

Stiffer arteries are less elastic and don't work as well to move blood through the body. Over a lifetime, most Americans have eaten a diet with too much salt, most have gained weight, and many are obese. These factors also lead to stiff arteries.

The systolic BP should always be below 140 mmHg. A lower level, less than 130 mmHg, is recommended for older adults who are at higher risk, such as those with diabetes. There are extremely good drug therapies to lower BP so there is no reason for anybody to have a "high" or "uncontrolled" BP. The drugs are very effective, safe and have only a few side effects. Unfortunately, it is often necessary to take more than one drug to lower BP successfully. Physicians have expertise in deciding which drugs are best for you. They will try to keep the cost and side effects of the drugs to a minimum. It is important that you do your part, know your BP level, and get it checked regularly.

Regrettably, only about 50 percent of older individuals have their BP controlled to levels less than 140 or 130 mmHg. Why does this happen? As a physician, I can answer this question. First, many individuals complain about the cost of the medications. Second, they feel that they are having unpleasant side effects. Third, they forget to have their prescriptions refilled. Fourth, they complain that they are taking too many drugs. Or fifth, they take BP medication but fail to get their BP checked. When your blood pressure goes unchecked, your pressure may be too high even though you are taking the medication. By checking your blood pressure regularly, your doctor can increase your dose as needed.

Consider several things to help to understand more about blood pressure and how to achieve better control.

The cost and disability from stroke, from developing dementia, from heart and kidney failure, are far greater than the cost of taking BP medication to prevent these diseases from occurring. Furthermore, the state of Pennsylvania has excellent

programs to help with the cost of drugs. Cost should never be a primary reason for not controlling your BP .

Many of the side effects that people experience may not be due to the drugs that they are taking for hypertension. As we age, we develop a variety of symptoms which we attribute to the drug therapy but are often due to other reasons. If you feel you are having side effects that you believe are medication related, ask your physician to modify the drugs to deal with these side effects.

Develop an approach to make certain you take your drugs every day. They usually can be taken at the same time so that you establish a routine.

It is very important to get your BP checked at frequent intervals. Many stores have automated BP machines that you can use and many organizations provide the opportunity to get your BP checked. You can also ask your doctor whether you should get a home BP monitoring machine. There are relatively good machines at low cost available. However, there is still controversy about the value of such machines.

You can also eat a very low salt diet and increase your intake of fruits and vegetables to get more potassium. Losing weight, if you are overweight, and drinking less alcohol will also help reduce your BP level. Unfortunately, these improvements, while important, are no substitute for effective drug therapy, especially for older individuals.

In addition to controlling blood pressure, remember that not smoking, controlling blood cholesterol levels, reducing excess weight, exercising and controlling your blood glucose are the most important keys to cardiovascular and cognitive health. Keep these keys in mind now, before it's too late. Health is wealth. Take action to get your blood pressure in good control.

*This column was written by Lewis H. Kuller, M.D., Dr.P.H.; University Professor of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, Graduate School of Public Health, University of Pittsburgh.*

*CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information about CHA contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit [www.healthyliving.pitt.edu](http://www.healthyliving.pitt.edu) .*