

Reducing Heart Attack and Stroke Risk

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Anyone who would like to reduce his or her risk of a stroke or heart attack may want to take the time to have a blood pressure check as a good step in that direction.

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is sometimes undetectable without examination. That is why it is so important to screen even healthy people on a yearly basis. These common medical problems are present in as many as 50 percent of men and women over the age of 65. However, high blood pressure can be present in children as well as adults.

The good news is that there are effective treatments for high blood pressure.

Elevated blood pressure among young and middle-aged adults is defined as a systolic pressure (the upper number) greater or equal to 140 and a diastolic pressure (the lower number) greater or equal to 90. The lower number generally rises very little after the age of 45, but the upper number becomes greater in many adults as they get older. Among the elderly, a systolic blood pressure as high as 160 may be normal.

Cigarettes, caffeine, alcohol, physical activity and stress can all raise blood pressure. Therefore, treatment of mild elevations in blood pressure usually begins without medication. Changes in lifestyle may be all that is necessary for some people to bring their blood pressure down to acceptable range.

Losing five to ten pounds and eliminating salt from the table and from cooking could be the difference between taking no medicine at all versus having to take medication every day for the rest of your life.

Regular aerobic activity and reducing alcohol consumption to two ounces a day, or eliminating alcohol consumption completely can help lower blood pressure.

If you do need medication to control your blood pressure, it is very important to take doses exactly as prescribed. If side effects occur, speak to your health care provider before stopping your medication. Mild side effects are often temporary. People also mistakenly alter the way they take their medicine based on how they feel.

As mentioned, hypertension is usually without symptoms, so that medication must be taken the same way every day to achieve long-term control and reduce risk of strokes and heart attacks.

Blood pressure measurements are highly variable under ordinary circumstances, so a single blood pressure reading may not give an accurate picture. Often, one or more readings may be taken if the pressure is elevated. As many as 20 percent of people have hypertension when it is measured in the doctor's office, but normal blood pressure when they take it at home. It is helpful to look at several readings over time, and some people have home blood pressure units and can check their own readings. If your blood pressure is above normal limits, recording the readings by keeping a log is a good idea and can really help your health care provider assess what's going on.

The Iliuliuk Family Health Services Clinic nurses can check your blood pressure during regular clinic hours by walking in to see them. It's steps you can take in the preventive health direction to reduce your risk for a heart attack or stroke.