

Don't Ignore High Blood Pressure

May is High Blood Pressure Education Month. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), more than half of American adults have high blood pressure, also known as hypertension. Contrary to many who believe hypertension is an “old person disease,” it actually can occur in young adults, too.

The ideal blood pressure for adults is a systolic pressure (top number) of less than 120 and a diastolic pressure (bottom number) of less than 80. According to the AHA, Hypertension Stage 1 is when blood pressure consistently ranges from 130-139 systolic or 80-89 diastolic, Hypertension Stage 2 is when blood pressure consistently ranges at 140/90 or higher, and a hypertensive crisis occurs if your blood pressure readings suddenly exceed 180/120. A hypertensive crisis requires medical attention.

Modifiable risk factors for hypertension include an unhealthy diet, a sedentary lifestyle, obesity, tobacco use, overconsumption of alcohol, and a consistent lack of sleep. Some people, however, end up being diagnosed with hypertension even if they do not have these risk factors. In those cases, Dr. Manharkumar Patel, an OSF HealthCare family medicine physician, says sometimes hypertension can be caused by an underlying condition.

“Whenever we see these patients, some will have these modifiable risk factors. This is called primary hypertension. But there is also something called secondary hypertension, which is when something else is causing the high blood pressure. For example, it can be the kidney function if the kidney function is slow, it can be some kind of tumor, something called [pheochromocytoma](#) – or it can be anything else in the body that can change the blood pressure,” explains Dr. Patel.

Other underlying causes of secondary hypertension can include diabetes, kidney disease, thyroid problems, sleep apnea, and pregnancy.

Some people may not experience any symptoms if they are hypertensive and do not know their blood pressure is high until it is checked at an annual doctor visit. Dr. Patel says, however, that if you or a loved one does experience symptoms that could indicate high blood pressure, you should make an appointment with your provider before your next annual visit. And if the symptoms are heightened, you may need to seek immediate medical attention.

“If somebody has exceptionally high blood pressure, they may have headaches that do not go away, they can have change in their vision, and they might just not be feeling well. They also may have excessive sweating. These can be common symptoms if the blood pressure is very high. If you do get these headaches and change in vision – the (systolic) blood pressure is usually more than 180,” Dr. Patel says.

Just like many people have a thermometer at home to check for fevers when sick, Dr. Patel recommends also getting a blood pressure cuff from a local drug store to keep around the house.

“If an individual finds that their blood pressure is high at any particular time, I would encourage them to start taking their blood pressure at home – maybe two to three times a week when they are relaxed. Record the blood pressures and bring them to your doctor’s office visit. This will give them a better assessment of the blood pressure rather than just saying that one time the blood pressure was high,” explains Dr. Patel.

Dr. Patel adds that if you do get a high blood pressure reading when at home, take it again a few minutes later to confirm it before worrying, as sometimes we can experience a high blood pressure sporadically. If it stays high, however, and you are also experiencing symptoms, you should call your doctor or go to a local urgent care or emergency department for evaluation.

Regular blood pressure checks and detecting high blood pressure early are key for positive outcomes in the long run. According to the AHA, when your blood pressure is too high for too long, it damages your blood vessels and causes bad cholesterol to accumulate in your artery walls. This can lead to coronary artery disease and increases the risk of heart attack, stroke, and heart failure down the line.

Dr. Patel says that lifestyle modifications are typically the first route to take when trying to control high blood pressure. He recommends physical activity like walking or swimming, quitting smoking if you are a smoker, reducing your alcohol consumption, getting on a proper sleep schedule, and following a heart healthy diet consisting of mainly fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, fish, and lean meats. Reducing your added sugars and salt intake is important, too.

“I would encourage people to cook homemade food and try to watch their salt intake. It’s okay to use salt, but not too much – just for taste. If you are buying any frozen food, there is a lot of sodium added to that, so I would encourage them not to buy those and to look at food labels which will show you the amount of sodium the product contains. We don’t want too much sodium because you can retain water and it may cause your blood pressure to go up,” Dr. Patel advises.

Hypertension should always be taken seriously. If you believe you may be experiencing hypertension, make an appointment with your primary care provider.

If your blood pressure is higher than 180/120, and/or you are experiencing chest pain, shortness of breath, back pain, numbness/weakness, change in vision, or difficulty speaking, do not wait to see if your pressure comes down on its own. Call 911 immediately.