

## The Cognitive Connection: Blood Pressure and Brain Decline

The American Heart Association (AHA) estimates that more than [100 million adults](#) in the United States are living with high blood pressure. That's almost half the adult population in the country.

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is known as the silent killer. It increases the risk of stroke, heart attack and other illnesses with few telltale symptoms. Now, new research suggests there is yet another reason for middle-aged and older adults to keep a close watch on their blood pressure: hypertension can impair cognitive abilities as a person ages.

The new research presented at the American Heart Association's (AHA) [Hypertension 2019 Scientific Sessions](#) indicates uncontrolled high blood pressure can affect a person's mind as they age. Researchers studied nearly 11,000 adults to find how the condition affects a person's memory, language, and thinking skills.

They found people over age 55 with untreated high blood pressure lost their mental abilities more quickly than those who didn't have hypertension or who took steps to treat the condition.

"What it basically showed is if you have hypertension, and if it's not being treated, your risk of declining cognition, or cognitive function is higher," explained Dr. Sudhir Mungee, an interventional cardiologist at OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute. He continued, "In fact, people who are appropriately treated, their declined rate was the same as people who did not have high blood pressure. So it's clearly defining hypertension as one of the risk factors for cognitive skills lost."

More people are living longer worldwide, and high blood pressure and cognitive decline are two of the most common conditions associated with aging. However Dr. Mungee warns that high blood pressure isn't only a concern for a patient's later years.

"It think it's very important to control those risks early in your life, and this study is kind of an eye opener in a way," he said. "It reinforces everything that we have known, but probably brings the light back into focus of what we really need to do when you are in your productive phase of life, which is to take care of yourself."

And taking care of yourself means understanding risk factors of hypertension.

"Dementia is not a quick phenomenon. This is decades of insult to the body with disease processes such as smoking, hypertension, diabetes, lack of physical activity, lack of exercise, and then it presents later in your life with cognitive skills diminishment or dementia," warned Dr. Mungee.

The first step in treating high blood pressure is knowing your numbers. Because high blood pressure doesn't come with many symptoms, getting frequent checks can provide insight into risk factors for not only cognitive impairment, but also for heart failure, heart attack, stroke, and many other illnesses.

Dr. Mungee says overall awareness has the potential to create a ripple effect of healthy living throughout the community.

“We just need to reinforce to our patients, our community at large, our younger and older population, our men and women, that identifying your risk, identifying your risk factors, trying to own your risk factors and correct them is really not only the key for success for you as an individual, but then at large for our community, for our nation, for our health care dollars.”

To learn more about your cardiovascular health and risk factors, click [here](#) for a free heart health risk assessment. You can also learn more about the OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute and ways you can lead a productive and healthy live at [osfhealthcare.org/heart](https://osfhealthcare.org/heart).