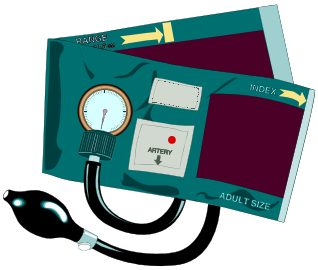

BLOOD PRESSURE TIP SHEET

High blood pressure (hypertension) is one of the most common and dangerous medical conditions in the U.S. today. It may have no warning symptoms. If uncontrolled, high blood pressure can lead to risk for stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney failure and blindness.

What is Blood Pressure?
Everybody has blood pressure. If we didn't, blood would be unable to move through our bodies. The heart works non-stop as a pump, pushing blood under pressure through a complex network of blood vessels. The force of that blood filling in the heart and pumping out against the vessel walls is called blood pressure.

What is Hypertension?
It is normal for blood pressure to go up and down throughout the day depending on activities and emotions. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is a condition in which blood pressure goes up too high and stays there. Although some people may think the word "hypertension" refers to nervousness and anxiety, it has little to do with personality types or being "hyper". Both relaxed and excitable people can have hypertension.

What is Normal Blood Pressure?
There is no one blood pressure that is "normal" for everyone. Day-to-day activities, age, gender, race and overall health can all make a difference in what is "normal" for you. A blood pressure reading is made up of two numbers. The first and higher number is the "*systolic"* pressure. This is the pressure in the arteries as the heart squeezes to pump blood. The second and lower of the two numbers is the *"diastolic"* pressure. This is the pressure in the arteries when the heart relaxes and fills with blood. The National Institutes of Health and the American Heart Association recommend the following guidelines for "adult resting blood pressure". A diagnosis of hypertension is made by a physician when a series of readings are consistently above normal levels as shown in the table below.

Classification of Blood Pressure for Adults Ages 18 Years and Older

BP CATEGORY	SYSTOLIC (mm HG)	DIASTOLIC (mm HG)
Normal	Less than 120	Less than 80
Pre-hypertension	120 - 139	80 – 89
Stage 1 Hypertension	140 - 159	90 – 99
Stage 2 Hypertension	160 or higher	100 or higher

What can you do to control or prevent hypertension?
High blood pressure is not curable, but it is controllable. Your own lifestyle has a great deal to do with its prevention and control. Some lifestyle factors are changeable, while some others are not.

Things You Cannot Change

Age: Statistics show that people are more likely to develop high blood pressure as they get older. This shouldn't be an expected result of aging in every person, however, and high blood pressure still needs to be treated or prevented.
Race: High blood pressure occurs at different rates among various populations. In the U.S., the African-American population is at greatest risk for hypertension, where it also tends to occur earlier and be more severe.
Heredity: If high blood pressure has been a part of your family history, then you are at greater risk of developing it yourself and should take steps to reduce your level of risk.
Sex: In general, men tend to experience high blood pressure more often than women. After menopause, however, the rate for women increases and can become greater than the rate for men. Pregnancy and/or the use of oral contraceptives may also increase a woman's risk for high blood pressure.

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Things You Can Change

Maintain a healthy weight:

- Check with your health care provider to see if you need to lose weight.
- If you do, lose weight slowly using a healthy eating plan. Read labels and know what's in the food you eat.

Follow a healthy eating plan:

- Select foods that are low in sodium because sodium increases fluid retention and may elevate blood pressure. Instead, use a variety of spices to add flavor to your meals. Rinse canned foods to remove salty juices.
- Eat foods low in saturated fat and cholesterol. Eat a variety of fresh vegetables, fresh fruits and low-fat dairy products. Avoid foods containing a lot of refined sugar or consume only in small amounts.
- Consult your health care provider or a registered dietician for a reputable dietary plan that is sustainable and appetizing. Maintaining a food diary of what you eat or drink may help you to find eating habits that are successful or need improvement. For more information log onto: **www.mypyramid.gov.**

Be physically active:

- Engage in sustained aerobic physical activity for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week (walking, biking, jogging, dancing, gardening, etc). This will help to keep the heart muscle strong. Be sure to consult your health care provider prior to starting any exercise program.

Restrict tobacco exposure:

- Nicotine and other products in tobacco steal oxygen away from red blood cells, narrowing and damaging blood vessel walls, causing blood pressure to go up.
- One pack of cigarettes per day adds an increased workload on the heart equivalent to an additional 50-75 pounds of body weight.
- Talk to your health care provider or local health department to obtain resources to assist with quitting. Maintain a smoke-free environment in your home and vehicle at all times.

Keep stress under control:

- Some stress is unavoidable and can provide personal motivation, but unproductive stress over a long period of time may contribute to elevated blood pressure.
- Relaxation techniques or participation in an enjoyable hobby can help to minimize the effects of negative emotional stress and keep your blood pressure down.

Drink alcohol only in moderation:

- In addition to raising blood pressure, too much alcohol can add unneeded calories to your diet.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, limit the amount – one drink a day for women, two drinks a day for men.

Take prescribed medications as directed:

- If you need prescribed medication to help lower your blood pressure, you should also follow lifestyle changes as mentioned above. Medication does not take the place of healthy habits for living.
- Consult with your health care provider before taking over-the-counter medications. Some of these medications may elevate blood pressure and may be contra-indicated for your prescription.
- Read medication labels and consult your doctor or pharmacist if you are not certain about the medication action or possible side effects.

Adapted by: Hales Corners Health Department
Sources: City of Milwaukee Health Department and National Institutes of Health
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