**Hypertension: Q&A**

**What is Hypertension?**

Hypertension is the medical term for high blood pressure, referring to the pressure of the blood in the arteries that is needed to keep blood flowing from the heart to all parts of the body. Each time the heart beats, it pumps blood into the arteries. Blood pressure is created by the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries as it is pumped by the heart. High blood pressure develops if the walls of the arteries lose their natural elasticity and become rigid and narrower. The higher the pressure the harder the heart has to pump1.

Hypertension is known as the silent killer since most people do not have any symptoms. In some cases hypertension causes symptoms such as headache, shortness of breath, dizziness, chest pain, palpitations of the heart and nose bleeds. The only way to find out what your blood pressure is is to measure it using acceptable measuring devices.

**What harm does Hypertension cause?**

Uncontrolled hypertension can lead to a heart attack, stroke, kidney failure and damage to eyesight. If left uncontrolled, hypertension can lead to a heart attack, an enlargement of the heart and eventually heart failure. Blood vessels may develop weak spots due to high pressure, making them more likely to clog and burst. The pressure in the arteries can also cause blood to leak out into the brain. This can cause a stroke1.

According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA about 130 heart attacks and 240 strokes occur daily in South Africa. This means that 10 people will suffer a stroke and five people will have a heart attack every hour2.

**Risk factors for Hypertension**

Hypertension is mainly related to environmental and lifestyle factors such as:

* Unhealthy diet:
* Consumption of food containing too much salt and fat.
* Not eating enough fruit and vegetables.
* Physical inactivity and lack of exercise.
* Harmful alcohol use.
* Smoking and use of other tobacco products.
* High levels of stress and poor stress management.

Genetic factors can also play a role in high blood pressure, heart disease, and other related conditions. People with family members diagnosed with high blood pressure are at risk of developing the disease and should therefore be mindful of the risk factors mentioned above and should go for regular check-ups.

**Statistics on Hypertension**

Worldwide approximately 4 in 10 adults older than 25 years have hypertension. This means that nearly 1 billion people have hypertension. It is estimated that only 50% of these people are aware of their condition and of these only half take action to control their blood pressure3.

In South Africa 1 in 3 adults have hypertension4. This makes South Africa one of the countries with the highest rates of hypertension worldwide2.

In the Western Cape Province approximately 1200 new cases of hypertension are diagnosed monthly3.

**What does your blood pressure measurement mean?**

Blood pressure is typically recorded as two numbers for e*xample* 122 over 82.

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| 122 | Systolic: Indicates the pressure in the arteries when the heart beats. |
| 82 | Diastolic: Indicates the pressure in the arteries between heartbeats. |

A guide to blood pressure levels5,6:

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| Normal blood pressure | below 120/80 to 129/84 |
| High normal blood pressure | 130/85 to 139/89 |
| Mild hypertension | 140/90 to 159/99 |
| Moderate hypertension | 160/100 to 179/109 |
| Severe hypertension | Above 180/110 |

**Prevention and self-management of Hypertension**

The Western Cape Government Department of Health (WCDoH) together with its valued partners launched the *WoW!* (WesternCape on Wellness) initiative in 2015 with the overarching purpose of promoting a healthy lifestyle movement in the Western Cape. This will be achieved by advocating and activating increased health-related physical activity, healthier eating and a healthy weight in order to prevent and reduce the burden of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension.

The initiative encourages people to make the following small changes for big benefits:

* Eating a healthy balanced diet:
* Reduce your salt intake to no more than 1 teaspoon (5g) of salt a day. Reduce the salt added to your food during cooking and at the table. Make use of fresh and dried herbs, spices, garlic or lemon juice to add flavour to your food, without adding extra salt or salty seasoning. Foods like packet soups, stock cubes, gravies, cheese, many breakfast cereals, breads, salty snacks, processed meats and fast foods are very high in salt, so should be used sparingly.
* Enjoy a variety of fruits and vegetables, and aim to have at least 5 servings a day.
* Choose whole grain and high fibre foods.
* Limit unhealthy saturated and trans fats, found in fatty and processed meats, chicken skin, full-cream dairy products, butter, ghee, cream and hard cheeses, commercially baked goods such as pies, pastries, biscuits and crackers, fast foods and deep-fried potato/slap chips.
* Eat healthier unsaturated fats such as sunflower / canola / olive oil, soft tub margarines, peanut butter, nuts and seeds, avocado or fish.
* Try to include fatty fish (sardines, pilchards, salmon, mackerel) at least twice a week
* Eat small, regular meals.
* Doing more physical activity:
* Increasing your level of physical activity does not mean having to join a gym or a sports group! There are lots of physical activities that are free, healthy and could be fun! For example, walking with your family and/or dog, dancing at home, avoiding lifts and taking the stairs instead, swimming and, gardening.
* Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate (e.g. fast walking) to vigorous (e.g. jogging) activity at least 4-5 days per week. You can accumulate those 30 minutes in bits of 10 minutes throughout the day.
* Or 150 minutes (2 and a half hours) per week in order to reduce your risk of a number of chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.
* If you would like to achieve a higher level of fitness, or would like to lose weight, then more physical activity is needed to achieve these goals, aiming for 300 minutes (5 hours) per week.
* Avoiding harmful alcohol use:
* Try to avoid using alcohol, and if you drink alcohol, limit it to no more than 1 drink a day for women and 2 drinks a day for men.
* Stopping tobacco use and exposure to tobacco products.
* Managing stress and striving for a good night’s sleep.
* Have your blood pressure and glucose levels checked at least once a year and more often if you have a family history of chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes.

**Treatment of Hypertension**

If Hypertension is detected early it is possible to minimize the risk of heart attack, heart failure, stroke and kidney failure. Individuals who already have hypertension can manage their condition by:

* Adopting the healthy behaviours listed above.
* Monitoring blood pressure at home if feasible.
* Go for regular check-ups at a health facility.
* Regularly taking any prescribed medications for lowering blood pressure and

following any other medical advice.

**More information on Hypertension**

* Visit the health facility in your area.
* Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (http://www.heartfoundation.co.za) Health Line: 0860 1 HEART (0860 1 43278) or [heart@heartfoundation.co.za](mailto:heart@heartfoundation.co.za).
* *WoW!* initiative: wow@westerncape.gov.za

**Reference**

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