High Blood Pressure

Introduction

The heart is a muscle that is designed to pump a constant supply of blood around the body. Therefore a certain amount of pressure is generated in our arteries to help the blood flow around our bodies.

There are two measurements used to assess blood pressure:

- **Systolic pressure** is the blood pressure that is exerted when the heart beats and forces blood around the body.
- **Diastolic pressure** is the measure of blood pressure when the heart is resting between beats.

So if your GP says that your blood pressure is '120 over 80', or 120/80mmHg, what they mean is that you have a systolic pressure of 120mmHg and a diastolic pressure of 80mmHg.

High blood pressure (hypertension)

Normal blood pressure readings for adults are **between 120/80 but below 140/90**. High blood pressure (hypertension) is therefore defined as having a blood pressure that stays above **140/90mmHg**. If you have high blood pressure, your heart has to work harder to pump blood around your body.

Who is affected by high blood pressure?

High blood pressure is common, with 40% of adults in England having the condition. The number of people who have high blood pressure increases with age. For reasons that are not entirely understood, people of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian (India, Pakistan and Bangladeshi) origins are more likely to develop high blood pressure than other ethnic groups. In 95% of cases, there is no single identifiable reason for a raise in blood pressure.

What could happen if blood pressure is left untreated?

- **Heart & Brain Damage**: High blood pressure can cause many different types of cardiovascular diseases, such as a stroke, heart attack, blood clot or aneurysm (a swollen, or burst, blood vessel).
- **Kidney Damage:** High blood pressure can damage the small blood vessels in your kidneys which can stop them working properly.

Symptoms

High blood pressure does not normally cause any symptoms until it has reached a very high level - typically 180/110 mmHg. Symptoms that could occur with extremely high blood pressure is headches, dizziness, nosebleeds or shortness of breath

If you experience any of these symptoms, you should see your GP as soon as possible.

Treatment

If your blood pressure is slightly high then your GP may decide to monitor you and give you lifestyle advice. If your blood pressure is moderately high, your GP may prescribe medicines, as well as giving you lifestyle advice. There are a number of medicines that can be used to treat high blood pressure.

How Do I Prevent Raised Blood Pressure?

Diet

A low fat, high fibre diet is recommended, including plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables (five portions a day) and whole grains. You should limit the amount of salt that you eat to no more than 6g (0.2oz) a day because too much salt will increase your blood pressure. 6g of salt is about one teaspoonful.

You should avoid foods that are high in saturated fat such as fatty cuts of meat, butter, ghee, cream and biscuits.

Weight

Being overweight is a risk factor for having high blood pressure, and your risk is increased further if you are obese. The best way of tackling obesity is to reduce the amount of calories that you eat, and ensure that you take regular exercise.

Exercise

Regular exercise will make your heart and blood circulatory system more efficient, it will lower your cholesterol level, and keep your blood pressure at a healthy level. For most people, thirty minutes of vigorous exercise a day, at least five times a week, is recommended. Examples of vigorous exercise include going for a brisk walk, or walking up a hill.

Smoking

Smoking can cause your arteries to narrow which, in turn, can lead to a rise in your blood pressure. It is also a major risk factor for developing cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

The NHS Smoking Helpline can offer you advice and encouragement to help you quit smoking. You can call on 0800 022 4 332, or visit the NHS Go smokefree website

It should be stressed that even achieving a relatively low drop in blood pressure can have significant health benefits. For example, a reduction of 5 mmHg in your diastolic blood pressure will reduce the chances of you having a stroke by 34%, and of developing heart disease by 20%.