Hypertension

January 23, 2014 Dr. Kela Henry

Hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, is a major health issue in the United States. It is estimated that 65 million adults suffer from this disease. Hypertension occurs when blood travels through arteries at higher pressures than normal. Imagine that your arteries are like flexible pipes which carry the blood from the heart throughout the body. In a person with high blood pressure, the heart is pumping extra hard and those pipes are stretching. If the pressure is not lowered, the pipes can burst. This can result in a stroke or heart attack.

When blood pressure is checked, two numbers are recorded. The first number–the systolic pressure–is a measure of the pressure of the blood when the heart beats. That is when blood is under the most pressure, thus it is the higher number. The second number–the diastolic pressure–is a measure of the pressure when the heart rests between beats. It is the lower number. According to the guidelines, the ideal blood pressure is 120/70 or less. However a realistic goal blood pressure is 130/80 or less, which is what many doctors aim for in everyday clinical practice. Adults age 20 and older should have their blood pressure checked at least every two years, preferably every year.

Hypertension is a problem because it puts added stress on the heart, blood vessels, and other major organs like the kidneys and brain. This is why doctors routinely order labs to look for early signs of kidney disease in people with hypertension. Although high blood pressure is a chronic disease, it can be controlled. There are several things you can do to lower your pressure: (1) exercise regularly, (2) quit smoking, (3) eat a healthy low salt diet, (4) lose weight if you are overweight, (5) limit alcohol consumption, and (6) take blood pressure medications as prescribed. Work with your health care provider to lower your blood pressure and thus decrease your risk for heart attack and stroke.

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