

THE "SILENT KILLER"

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February has been known as American Heart Month since 1963; a month set aside to encourage Americans to learn more about and engage in activities to protect themselves against heart disease. The CDC estimates that heart disease takes the lives of 630,000 Americans each year – 1 in 4 deaths. It remains the leading cause of death in both men and women.

High blood pressure is one of the factors that increase your risk for heart disease. When blood flows through your arteries it puts pressure on the walls of your vessels. Elevated blood pressure over time makes your arteries less elastic which can decrease the flow of blood to your heart, which can cause chest pain, heart attack, heart failure and stroke.

High blood pressure is often called the “silent killer” because there are no symptoms.

The only way to know if your blood pressure is high is to have it checked. The good news is there are a lot of things you can do to manage your blood pressure.

- 1. Be active.** Americans are recommended to be physically active 150 minutes a week. It is difficult to safely exercise consistently in this neck of the woods this time of the year. But there are exercise DVD's, YouTube videos, walk here at the hospital, join one of the local fitness centers that offer a variety of styles of exercise classes and equipment or purchase your own equipment for your home. No one will block your schedule for exercise except you. You won't see results after one session, but stay committed. Look at it as an investment in your health that pays huge dividends.
- 2. Cut back on the sodium in your diet.** Current recommendation for Americans is to consume 1500-2000 mg sodium a day. It is estimated that 95% of the sodium you consume is not from what you shake on your food, but what is already in the food when you purchase it. Bottom line then is that it is critical to read food labels. If a food has more than about 200 mg sodium per serving, be careful how many servings you are eating. There are lots of seasonings other than salt, so try some to find what works for you. Be sure to read the labels for sodium content since some blends still contain some salt. You can also try using lemon juice, lime juice or vinegar for a salt flavor without the sodium.

- 3. DASH.** The DASH diet is best known as a meal plan to prevent and control blood pressure. The acronym stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension. The diet is low in sodium, but the science behind it shows foods high in potassium, calcium, protein and fiber are all important players in controlling blood pressure. In studies, the DASH diet has been shown to lower systolic blood pressure by as much as 11 mmHg within the first two weeks of starting it.

The DASH diet recommends 8-10 servings of fruits and vegetables daily along with whole grains, nuts, lean animal proteins such as chicken and fish, and low fat dairy foods. It is safe for all ages so the whole family can follow the program. It is called a “diet” but it should be a “lifestyle.”

- 4. Stop smoking.**
- 5. Limit alcohol consumption to one drink per day.**
- 6. Weight loss** (if you need to) is thought by many health professionals to be the most effective way to lower blood pressure. Even losing 10 pounds can lower blood pressure (blood sugar and lipids too).
- 7. Manage your stress.** Stress hormones can constrict your blood pressure causing temporary increases in your blood pressure. Do something every day to lower your stress level such as exercise, yoga, meditation, reading or doing puzzles. Prioritize finding that balance in your life between work and play.

