

“DASH” Your Way to Lower Blood Pressure and a Healthier Lifestyle

By

Gregory Cohn, MD

Hypertension (high blood pressure) is a major health issue in the United States, affecting approximately 50 million people. As our population ages (and increases in weight), the prevalence of hypertension is only likely to increase. Recent data from the Framingham Heart Study suggest that individuals who have a normal blood pressure at age 55 have a **90 percent** lifetime risk for developing hypertension! The relationship between blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular disease is continuous, consistent, and independent of other risk factors. Specifically, hypertension greatly increases risk for stroke, myocardial infarction, atrial fibrillation (the most common heart arrhythmia), congestive heart failure (the most common reason for hospitalization in the US), and kidney disease (high blood pressure is one of the leading causes of end-stage kidney disease). For adults aged 40-70 years, each increment of 20 mmHg (millimeters of mercury) in systolic blood pressure (the top number) or 10 mmHg in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number) **doubles** the risk of cardiovascular disease across the spectrum of blood pressure. It is now understood that elevated diastolic blood pressure is the primary problem in those younger than age 50, but that systolic blood pressure is much more important (and harder to treat successfully) in those above this age.

Normal blood pressure is considered to be less than 120/80 mmHg, and hypertension is defined as readings consistently greater than 140 mmHg systolic or greater than 90 mmHg diastolic. Blood pressures of 120-139 mmHg systolic or 80-89 mmHg diastolic have been classified as “prehypertension.” Individuals with blood pressures in this range are at increased risk for progression to hypertension, and should enact measures aimed at preventing such an occurrence. Recommended lifestyle measures to prevent hypertension include weight reduction in those who are overweight or obese, increased physical activity, and moderation of alcohol consumption. Dietary changes are another important aspect of lifestyle modification that has been well studied.

Adoption of the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan is probably the most common dietary recommendation, and has been repeatedly documented to produce results. The DASH plan incorporates evidence that sodium intake generally increases blood pressure, while intake of potassium, calcium, and magnesium has a tendency to lower it. It is important to understand that simply taking supplements of the latter three minerals has **not** been shown to lower blood pressure. It is also vital to understand that the DASH eating plan is **not a diet, but a lifestyle change**. Simply summarized, this eating plan involves an increased intake of fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products. When this is combined with sodium restriction, blood pressure can be reduced by an amount similar to any single antihypertensive medication. Blood pressure can be reduced even further when this eating plan is combined with regular exercise and weight loss. Following this eating plan has also been shown to decrease levels of LDL-cholesterol (bad cholesterol) and is “heart-friendly.” In fact, recently published long-term results of the Nurses’ Health Study found that adherence to a DASH style eating plan was associated with a significantly lower risk of heart disease and stroke among middle-aged women during 24 years of follow up. Anyone can practice these healthy habits, but those with prehypertension may prevent the development of full blown hypertension, and avoid the need for medication. Even those individuals who already have established hypertension may improve their control and lessen their need for medication by implementing these simple measures.

Gregory Cohn, M.D. has a concierge Internal Medicine practice in Boca Raton specializing in Cardiovascular Disease prevention and Hypertension. Dr. Cohn is a board-certified internist and clinical lipidologist and has been practicing medicine in Florida since 1991. Dr. Cohn can be reached at (561)367-7447 or www.gregcohnmd.com.