

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE – A SILENT KILLER

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Hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, is a leading risk factor for the development of cardiovascular disease that includes heart attack, heart failure, and stroke. Based on statistics provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 1 in 3 US adults are affected by this medical condition. African and Latin Americans tend to develop hypertension more than Caucasians. Over the age of 65, women and men are equally affected by hypertension. Despite the frequency of this disease, less than 50% of those individuals with hypertension have their condition under control.

What is blood pressure? Blood pressure is the measurement of force applied to arterial walls. Measuring your blood pressure can be performed with the use of an inflatable cuff attached to a pressure gauge which delivers a blood pressure reading measured in millimeters of mercury (mmHg). There are two components to this reading: the systolic number, which represents the peak pressure when the heart is beating, and the diastolic number, which represents the lowest pressure when the heart is relaxing. A blood pressure reading of 130/80 mmHg or less is considered normal. Any blood pressure reading equal to or greater than 140/80 mmHg is consistent with hypertension.

There are many risk factors for the development of hypertension that include increasing age, smoking, diabetes, high sodium diet, a diet low in fruits and vegetables, lack of exercise, obesity, and excessive alcohol use.

Hypertension is often known as the 'silent killer', as many individuals who suffer from this disease are completely asymptomatic. Regular monitoring of one's blood pressure, coupled by regular visits with their healthcare provider can often allow for early detection of hypertension, thereby leading to early treatment. Initial treatment often involves diet and lifestyle modifications, (i.e. smoking cessation, alcohol reduction, and weight loss through diet and exercise). Initiation of blood pressure reduction medications may occur concomitantly or after diet/lifestyle modification fails to adequately reduce blood pressure. Depending on the severity of disease, individuals may require multiple anti-hypertensive medications.

Since hypertension is a risk factor for numerous cardiovascular diseases, a patient with diagnosed high blood pressure is often referred to a cardiovascular disease specialist (cardiologist). A cardiologist may recommend further work-up which can include an echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart chambers and valve structures) and a cardiac stress test.

Hypertension is a common medical condition that affects a large portion of the US population. Early detection and treatment is essential in an effort to reduce a largely preventable disease.

-Dr. Elizabeth Cosmai-Cintron is a board certified cardiovascular disease specialist with Florida Heart Associates. She is interested in educating people on preventive heart care and maintaining good heart health through proper nutrition, exercise and reducing risk factors that leads to heart disease. For more information, please call her office at (239) 938-2000 or visit her website at www.flaheart.com