

The Silent Killer

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(This week's article for "Extension Connection" is written by Ashley Harrison, UGA School of Pharmacy Student Intern under the direction of Denise Everson.)

If you found out that you have a 90% risk of developing a disease after the age of 55, and that there are things you can do to help prevent this disease, would you take action? This scenario is not hypothetical; it is a current statistic for the average American's chance of developing high blood pressure in his or her lifetime. Unfortunately, high blood pressure does not have any distinguishable symptoms and can lead to many other health conditions such as stroke, heart attack, and even heart failure. It can easily go undetected and untreated which is why it has been termed "The Silent Killer".

Awareness of common risk factors for hypertension, and knowledge of ranges that are considered "normal" as well as those that are classified as hypertensive are essential. First it is important to find out if you are predisposed to develop hypertension. Some factors that put an individual at risk for developing hypertension include smoking, obesity, sedentary lifestyle, diabetes, family history, and age (over 55 for men and over 65 for women). If any of these risk factors apply to you, the next step is to learn exactly what is considered "high" blood pressure.

A value below 120/80mmHg is considered a healthy, normal blood pressure. Anything between 120/80mmHg and 139/89mmHg is now considered "pre-hypertensive." This is the stage before a person is diagnosed as having high blood pressure. This pre-hypertension state is a crucial point in a person's health. From here, an individual can either continue towards high blood pressure and its complications, or turn his or her health status in a positive direction. The first stage of hypertension is when values range between 140/90-159/99mmHg. Stage 2 hypertension is classified as anything greater than 160/100mmHg. The top number is the measure of systolic pressure while the bottom number is the measure of diastolic pressure. It is important to note that if either value is high, a person is placed in that category of high blood pressure. While both values are important, the systolic value is a stronger indicator of the risk of developing hypertension-related complications.

There are many simple changes a person can make to his or her lifestyle to aid in prevention or reduction of hypertension. For every 10kg (approximately 22lbs) of weight lost, blood pressure values will decrease by 5-20mmHg. Physical activity of 30 minutes per day most days of the week will reduce blood pressure. Reducing calories, saturated fat, and intake of salt and processed foods will all contribute to reduced blood pressure and lower risk of developing hypertension.

So the next time you are in your local pharmacy, think twice before walking past the blood pressure machine. Take a few minutes to sit down and get your reading. With this knowledge and a few simple steps, you can take your health into your own hands and take charge of your well-being.

For more information, contact the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Office at (706) 769-3946 or stop by our office located behind the Oconee County Courthouse.