

Monitor your blood pressure to avoid a stroke

By Robert Pierpont, MD

If you want to avoid having a stroke, you can take a big step in that direction by monitoring your blood pressure.

High blood pressure, or hypertension, can lead to strokes and resulting disabilities that can affect the rest of your life. It can also lead to heart attacks and kidney failure. But it is so easy to get your blood pressure taken once a year that it just makes sense to find out whether you have this condition and begin treating it.

The sooner it's under control, the better.

High blood pressure rarely shows symptoms, but it is pervasive in our society. The National Heart Lung and Blood Institute says that one in three American adults has it, which is why getting a blood pressure reading is important.

High blood pressure means the force of blood pushing against your blood vessels is too high. It can overwork your heart and cause many forms of damage to your body.

The older you are, the more likely it is that you will have high blood pressure. But people who are overweight, drink too much, smoke and don't exercise are at greater risk than others.

A reading of 130/80 or higher indicates high blood pressure – although to make a firm diagnosis, the test should be repeated several times. I usually tell patients who have an initial high reading to go home, make lifestyle changes and come back later for another reading.

About 10 percent of patients with high readings can bring their blood pressure back to normal by taking steps like losing weight, reducing salt intake to 2000 mg per day, exercising 30 minutes daily, reducing alcohol consumption to one drink a day and quitting smoking. Managing stress can't hurt, either.

In my experience, most hypertensive patients need medication to control their blood pressure. It often takes some time and patience to find the right one. Don't be discouraged if the first one doesn't work for you. With literally hundreds of medications available, your physician should be able to get it under control without side effects. And never stop taking it without working with your doctor.

For those who need medication but would rather make the lifestyle changes, I highly recommend taking the prescribed drug and working on the changes with the goal of eventually getting off the pills.

Once diagnosed, some people want to find out more about the condition. I suggest that they look at reputable Web sites such as the American Heart Association (www.americanheart.org), the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute (www.nhlbi.nih.gov) or WebMD (www.webmd.com).

If your doctor tells you your blood pressure is high, don't panic. It's highly treatable and lowering it could add years to your life.