

Diet key to blood pressure

February 6 2009, By Drs. Kay Judge and Maxine Barish-Wreden

If you're like many Americans, your blood pressure has crept up as you've gotten older. But it doesn't have to. Our lifestyle has an impact on blood pressure; in fact, in parts of the world where people still live as their ancestors did, high blood pressure is rare. Things that contribute to a healthy blood pressure include a diet high in fruits and vegetables.

It's not clear how fruits and veggies exert their effect, though it likely has something to do with vitamin and mineral content. A new study from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute sheds light on this, suggesting that higher vitamin C levels are linked to healthy blood pressure. In the Growth and Health Study, 242 girls ages 8-11 were followed for 10 years, and their blood pressure and vitamin C blood levels were measured regularly.

Researchers found that the girls with the highest blood levels of vitamin C had lower systolic and diastolic blood pressures. It wasn't clear if the vitamin was helping to lower blood pressure or there was a marker for some other healthy nutrient. More research is needed.

In the meantime, multiple things will help keep your blood pressure normal as you age, and also protect your heart. Here are some lifestyle tips:

- Eat lots of fruits and veggies every day, especially those high in potassium and vitamin C, such as citrus; dark green, leafy veggies; and melons.

- Keep up that fiber intake. Aim for at least 50 grams per day. Some studies suggest that fiber such as psyllium and wheat bran can help lower blood pressure. It's estimated that prehistoric folks got about 100 grams of fiber per day in their diet; the average American now gets about 10.
- Eat calcium-rich food every day. Calcium also seems to help regulate blood pressure. Or take a calcium supplement twice daily with food.
- Take a vitamin D supplement daily. Population studies suggest that people with low vitamin D blood levels are at higher risk of developing hypertension as well as obesity and diabetes.
- Fish oil may help to reduce blood pressure, so try to eat high-fat fish at least twice per week or take a fish oil supplement daily.
- Consider taking garlic, coenzyme Q-10 and dark chocolate. These all help to relax blood vessels and may help to lower blood pressure as well.
- Watch that sodium! If you have high blood pressure, keep your dietary sodium intake under 1,500 mg/day; otherwise, try to stay under 2,000 mg/day.
- Exercise every day and maintain your weight, two of the most powerful things you can do for your blood pressure.

If you are already taking blood pressure medications and you decide to try some of the above, be sure to talk to your doctor _ you may need an adjustment in your meds. By leading a healthy lifestyle, you're bound to need less medication, which is good news for the health of your body and your wallet!

(Drs. Kay Judge and Maxine Barish-Wreden are medical directors of Sutter's Downtown Integrative Medicine program.)

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