Medical Xpress

# Which single behavior best prevents high blood pressure?

September 15 2017, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter

(HealthDay)—You probably already know that certain healthy lifestyle

behaviors can reduce your risk of developing high blood pressure, but is any one behavior more important than the others?

Maybe, as new research suggests maintaining a healthy weight is the No. 1 behavior to prevent unhealthy blood pressure levels.

"Our results indicate by maintaining a healthy body weight into middle age, you can help preserve low blood pressure," said the study's lead author, John Booth III. He's a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

"There have been increases in blood pressure at younger ages, which are linked to heart disease and stroke," Booth said. "We evaluated the long-term impact of maintaining healthy behaviors on [high blood pressure]."

Booth and his colleagues looked at the effects of five healthy behaviors:

- Never smoking
- Drinking 7 or fewer alcoholic drinks weekly for women or 14 or fewer drinks a week for men
- Eating a healthy diet (following the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, or DASH diet)
- Getting 150 minutes or more a week of moderate to vigorous physical activity
- Maintaining a healthy weight.

The study included almost 4,700 volunteers. They were between 18 and 30 years old when the study started in 1985 and 1986.

Over 25 years of follow-up, the researchers measured blood pressure and health behaviors eight times.

People who maintained a healthy body weight were 41 percent less likely

to see their blood pressure rise as they approached middle age.

Study volunteers who maintained at least four of the healthy behaviors had a 27 percent decreased risk of high blood pressure by middle age.

Staying physically active and eating a healthy diet weren't specifically linked to a better blood pressure.

On the other hand, never smoking and drinking little to no alcohol seemed to keep blood pressure lower in middle age. But the researchers said a larger study is needed to confirm these because they may have been a chance finding.

Since maintaining a healthy body weight appears to be a more important behavior than the others, does that mean you don't need to be concerned about a healthy diet or getting enough exercise?

Not at all, Booth said.

He said other health behaviors are linked to maintaining a healthy weight , with exercise and a healthy diet chief among them.

"Multiple factors are contributing to the risk for developing high blood pressure across the life span, and these factors all interact together," Booth noted.

Still, the study showed a clear benefit to staying trim from a young age through middle age.

Just what is it about weight that may boost blood pressure?

Dr. Howard Selinger is chair of family medicine at the Frank H. Netter M.D. School of Medicine at Quinnipiac University in North Haven,

Conn. He said weight may contribute to high blood pressure in a number of ways.

"When you gain weight, your heart has to work harder because the weight has a compressive effect on the blood vessels. Over decades, that can produce cardiac problems. The vascular bed—the blood vessels—stiffens as we get older," Selinger said.

But for people who don't gain weight, there's less stiffening. "That, in turn, keeps blood pressure lower and prevents more serious outcomes. If you lower your weight, you lower the pressure," Selinger explained.

He said weight is clearly an important factor in keeping blood pressure at a healthy level. But he considers the other factors important too, especially never smoking.

Findings from the study were scheduled for presentation Thursday at an American Heart Association meeting, in San Francisco. Studies presented at meetings are generally viewed as preliminary until they've been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

**More information:** John N. Booth III, Ph.D., postdoctoral fellow, American Heart Association's Strategically Focused Hypertension Research Network, University of Alabama at Birmingham; Howard Selinger, M.D., chair, family medicine, Frank H. Netter M.D. School of Medicine, Quinnipiac University, North Haven, Conn.; Sept. 14, 2017, presentation, American Heart Association meeting, San Francisco

Learn more about maintaining a healthy weight from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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