How many people are affected by hypertension?

As we age, our likelihood of having high blood pressure (also called hypertension) progressively increases. For example, in the United States, less than 10% of those under 35 have hypertension. Double that age, and the risk increases well over six fold. More than two thirds of Americans over the age of 70 have high blood pressure.

Another testimony to the frequency of hypertension is this: other than prenatal visits, high blood pressure is the single most common reason for doctor’s visits and prescription drugs in the United States.

Most individuals with high blood pressure have no symptoms, so what’s the worry?

Over time, hypertension takes a toll on our brains. Stroke and high blood pressure are accomplices in robbing us of cognitive performance. But the ravages of high blood pressure affect more than our brains. Hypertension increases our risk of heart disease, aneurisms (ballooning of blood vessel walls that may rupture), vision problems and kidney disease. Controlling your blood pressure can prevent many of these complications.

How high a blood pressure is too high?

A look at scientific data suggests that if you are healthy and employing natural lifestyle strategies, the lower your blood pressure (BP), the better. For example, evidence indicates a BP of 110/70 is better than 120/80. However, once you add drugs to the picture, everything changes. Because of side effects of medications, most people receive no benefits from getting their blood pressure much lower than 140/90.

LifeStart for high blood pressure

Indeed, lifestyle changes appear to be the safest and most prudent approaches to controlling blood pressure. However, before making dramatic lifestyle changes, consult with your physician. Significant behavioral changes may well require a medication adjustment.

If you are looking to maximize the benefits of lifestyle changes when it comes to high blood pressure, why not consider implementing a number of the following LifeStart strategies:

L—Liquids. Water is the single best beverage if you are trying to control your blood pressure naturally. Listen to some of the problems associated with other popular beverages:
• **Alcohol.** More than three drinks at a time raises blood pressure significantly. However, even less alcohol presents blood pressure problems. It can reduce the effectiveness or increase the side effects of many drugs. Furthermore, alcohol packs a powerful caloric load, containing nearly twice as many calories as pure sugar. This, of course, can contribute to weight gain (which itself tends to raise blood pressure). Furthermore, even small amounts of alcohol can undermine resolve, making it easier to slip back into old habits that have been contributing to high blood pressure.

• **Soft drinks.** One connection between soft drinks and high blood pressure is their contribution to weight gain. Harvard researchers examined this relationship in some 30 research publications. They concluded, “The weight of epidemiologic and experimental evidence indicates that a greater consumption of SSBs [sugar-sweetened beverages] is associated with weight gain and obesity.”

Diet soft drinks have also been connected to high blood pressure and/or its complications. Consider research from Columbia University and the University of Miami that demonstrated a connection between diet soft drinks and stroke. Among more than 2,500 multiethnic participants in Manhattan, those who drank diet soft drinks daily had a 43% greater risk of vascular events (including heart attacks and strokes) than those who avoided these beverages.

• **Caffeine.** “Reviews of caffeine’s acute effect on blood pressure indicate changes of 3–15 mm Hg systolic and 4–13 mm Hg diastolic. Typically, blood pressure changes occur within 30 minutes, peak in 1–2 hours, and may persist for more than 4 hours.”

More than a decade ago, Jack E. James, PhD, compiled a state-of-the-science review on caffeine. The title of his findings shouted a message to the medical community: “Critical Review of Dietary Caffeine and Blood Pressure: A Relationship That Should Be Taken More Seriously.” Dr. James’ concerns don’t appear to have been allayed by the passing of time. Many medical practitioners view caffeine’s influence on blood pressure as hardly worthy of notice. However, others have agreed with James: “Reviews of caffeine’s acute effect on blood pressure indicate changes of 3-15 mm Hg systolic and 4-13 mm Hg diastolic. Typically, blood pressure changes occur within 30 minutes, peak in 1-2 hours, and may persist for more than 4 hours.”

I—**Interpersonal Relationships.** Social connectedness can help lower your blood pressure. A study from Switzerland compared 22 hypertensive subjects with 26 individuals who had normal blood pressure. They found that those with less social support tended to have higher blood pressure readings. Why would there be such a connection?

Some of the evidence suggests the following: when you get social support, your stress hormones levels tend to decrease. As those levels fall, so does your blood pressure. Consequently, if you want to do all you can to lower your pressure, we recommend connecting with a faith community or other support group in your area. Check our website for a list of locations.

F—**Food.** When it comes to food choices, there are at least three powerful practices that can lower your blood pressure:

• **Eat more plant foods.** The fewer animal products you consume, the less likely you are to have high blood pressure. This is one of the resounding messages of the Seventh-day Adventist Health study, a longitudinal research project involving nearly 90,000 individuals. Those eating no animal products whatsoever had only one-fifth the likelihood of having high blood pressure as those eating a more typical American diet. However, plant-rich diets do more than prevent the development of hypertension. After reviewing 80 scientific studies, Drs. Susan Berkow and Neal Barnard concluded: blood pressure “is lowered when animal products whatsoever had only one-fifth the likelihood of having high blood pressure as those eating a more typical American diet.”
The message is simple, specialize in eating fruits, nuts, whole grains, beans, and other vegetables and you will reap tremendous benefits as far as lowering your blood pressure.

- **Lower your caloric intake to help shed excess pounds.** That's right. If you are overweight, trimming down will help lower your blood pressure. By the way, this is one of the additional benefits of the vegetarian diet. Most people lose weight even when they eat liberally of whole plant foods like fruits, whole grains, and vegetables.

- **Watch your sodium consumption.** Small decreases in salt intake can yield large improvements in blood pressure. Consider this: the average American consumes one and a half teaspoons of salt a day rather than the one teaspoon recommended maximum. Research published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* revealed that if those of us living in the U.S. could decrease our average daily salt intake by just one half teaspoon, we would prevent tens of thousands of annual deaths from strokes and heart attacks, saving $10-24 billion in health care costs.9 If you’re convinced you are not a big salt user. Think again. Most of our salt comes in the form of prepared, processed, and restaurant foods. If you are not reading labels—and getting nutritional information on the foods you select when you eat out—then you’re probably eating too much salt. Indeed, salt seems inexpensive, but it is really extremely costly when it comes to our health.

**E—Exercise.** Research studies document that, on average, exercise lowers blood pressure four to six points systolic and three points diastolic. However, for some individuals, exercise alone can drop their blood pressure up to 15 points. Because of the large potential impact of exercise (and the advisability of knowing which types of exercise might be best for you personally), we recommend checking with your doctor before beginning an exercise program.

**S—Sunlight.** Sufficient sun exposure is generally the best way to ensure healthy levels of vitamin D. And, when it comes to blood pressure, this is very important. The data indicates that vitamin D has blood pressure lowering properties.10 If you live far from the Equator, you probably will need to take a vitamin D supplement, at least during the winter months. If you have questions about your status relating to this important vitamin, ask your doctor to check your 25-hydroxy vitamin D level.

**T—Temperance** involves total avoidance of that which is harmful and the use of things that are beneficial in moderation. (Most people like to talk about “moderation in everything,” but this misses a key facet of the optimal lifestyle approach.) One class of medications that those with high blood pressure should try to avoid are the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These include popular pain relievers like aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen. One exception among over-the-counter pain relievers is acetaminophen (the active ingredient in Tylenol®). If you are on an NSAID, work with your doctor to see if there are alternatives that might be options for you. Don’t hesitate to ask about natural products which help control pain without blood-pressure-raising effects. These likely include omega-3 fats and turmeric.

**A—Fresh Air.** This element is so important. The single worst source of pollution for our blood pressure is arguably tobacco smoke. A single cigarette can raise blood pressure significantly, as much as 25 points. Dipping and chewing also tend to raise blood pressure. The safest and best course is to make a clean break with tobacco.

**R—Rest.** If you have been cutting yourself short on sleep, your blood pressure will tend to rise. This is because our bodies ramp up our stress hormones to help us function when we are running short on sleep. In other words, adequate rest has blood-pressure-lowering properties.

**T—Trust in Divine Power.** Many of us are raising our blood pressure because of continued worry and anxiety. One of the best ways to control stress is to realize there is Someone beyond ourselves who is interested in our health as well as our other concerns. The Great Physician put it this way, “Come to me, all of you who are tired and have heavy loads, and I will give you rest”11.
Summary

The natural, lifestyle-based strategies found in the LifeStart acronym are calculated to help you achieve better blood pressure readings. To learn more about the nine strategies behind the LifeStart program, visit the LifeStart Seminars website and download the FREE LifeStart eBook. For best results, consult with your healthcare providers and find a local support center where you can surround yourself with a community of supportive peers. Our online directory will help you locate such individuals in your community. Also on our website you'll find a variety of resources to help you on your journey to a healthier blood pressure. These resources include books, DVDs, and other health products that I and other medical professionals have endorsed.

www.lifestartseminars.com

Endnotes


2. Gardener H., et al. “Diet soft drink consumption is associated with an increased risk of vascular events in the Northern Manhattan Study.” Journal of General Internal Medicine, 27(9) (September 2012): 1,120–1,126.


11. Matthew 11:28 (Scripture taken from the New Century Version®. Copyright © 2005 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.)