

Hypertension in Women

Hypertension is a silent and deadly disease, made all the more notorious by the fact that by the time symptoms occur, damage has already been done. High blood pressure is defined by a sustained systolic blood pressure of 140 or greater, a diastolic pressure of 90 or greater, or both. Nearly one third of Americans are afflicted with this disease.¹ About one in four adults are prehypertensive (blood pressure higher than 120/80). Hypertension is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke, the first and third most prevalent causes of death in the U.S. It is also a major risk factor for congestive heart failure and kidney disease. Over 50% of adults over age 55 have hypertension and over the age of 65, 64.1% of men and 70.8% of women are hypertensive. After the age of 55, more women than men are affected by hypertension. Due to this trend, older women in particular must become more aware of their health and take steps towards treatment.² Research suggests that for the same increment of blood pressure elevation, women have a greater degree of systemic damage.³

Studies indicate that 25% of women with hypertension are unaware that they have it.⁴ Only about 60% of women with hypertension receive treatment, and of those who are treated, only about one in three have ideally controlled blood pressure levels.⁵

Hypertension is particularly predominant among women who have a family history of hypertension or have gout, kidney disease, or diabetes. It is also prevalent among the overweight or obese, adults older than 50, African Americans, people who drink excessive

¹BWH Women's Health, 2011

²"High blood pressure," 2011

³American Heart Association, 2011

⁴"Effect of high," 2011

⁵Lewis, 2008

amounts of alcohol or women taking oral contraceptives. Ethnicity is an important factor in determining the risk for hypertension in individuals and populations. The American Heart Association reported that over the age of 20, approximately 44.8% of African American women, 31.6% of Mexican American women and 31.1% of non-Hispanic Caucasian women are afflicted by this disease.⁶

Hypertension is a very serious disease and if it goes untreated, the effects upon the body can be severe. High blood pressure can weaken a blood vessel until it breaks and bleeds into the brain, causing a stroke. It can also cause a blood vessel to narrow and if a blood clot blocks it, a stroke can occur. Blood vessels in the eye can also burst, resulting in impaired vision and blindness. The number one risk factor for congestive heart failure is hypertension. This disease is caused by the heart's inability to sufficiently pump blood to the rest of the body. Moreover, hypertension also increases the risk for heart attacks because the narrowing of arteries can decrease the flow of oxygen to the heart, which causes chest pain (angina) and a heart attack can result. Additionally, high blood pressure causes kidney damage. The resultant narrowing and thickening of kidney blood vessels decreases the amount of fluid filtered and increases the amount of waste in the blood. This can also cause kidney failure.⁷

Even though hypertension is much more prevalent in older adults, women in their reproductive years should be concerned and aware of the risks of hypertension during pregnancy. One in ten pregnancies is complicated by hypertension.⁸ During pregnancy, hypertension can cause damage to the mother's kidneys and other organs, early delivery

⁶BWH Women's Health, 2011

⁷"Effect of high," 2011

⁸Lewis, 2008

and low birth weight. In the most grievous case, the mother can contract pregnancy-induced hypertension or preeclampsia. This condition usually occurs after the 20th week of pregnancy and is marked by elevated blood pressure and proteinuria (presence of proteins in the urine, usually due to kidney damage).⁹

Women with pre-existing hypertension, a history of blood pressure problems, obesity, diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, kidney disease, or scleroderma are more likely to have preeclampsia. Women who are pregnant with more than one child, or are younger than 20 or older than 40, are also at risk. The most common indicators of preeclampsia are proteinuria and increased blood pressure. The symptoms can go undetected so women with these risk factors should stay in touch with a physician to maintain optimal health.¹⁰¹¹

Studies show that over the age of 55, systolic pressure rises more sharply in women than in men. Systolic pressure seems to be much more elevated from the norm than diastolic pressure so doctors tend to pay more attention to the systolic pressure. This condition has been labeled specifically isolated systolic hypertension. By age 60, one in two Americans has hypertension and most of these cases are of isolated systolic hypertension. There has also been a link between the onset of menopause and increasing incidence of hypertension. Due to this correlation, experts believe that estrogen may protect women against hypertension and thusly, when estrogen levels drop rapidly with the onset of menopause, women are no longer shielded against the illness. Some afflictions that promote or augment hypertension are anemia, a malfunctioning aortic valve, kidney

⁹"High blood pressure," 2011

¹⁰"Effect of high," 2011

¹¹"High blood pressure," 2011

disease, overactive thyroid or adrenal gland, obstructive sleep apnea, and age-related stiffening of the arteries. It is imperative for adult women in the United States to assess their risk for hypertension and take steps toward prevention or treatment.¹²

¹²"Women--especially older women--need," 2009

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