



Blood Pressure and the Brain

Can putting the brakes on BP keep your brain healthy for life?

Doctors have long known that high blood pressure (HBP)—defined as readings of 140/90 or higher—is a “silent killer” that can harm the heart, harden the arteries and cause strokes, often without producing any symptoms.

Now there’s mounting evidence that HBP, suffered by one in three

Americans, raises the risk of cognitive decline, dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. Fortunately, other research indicates the reverse may also be true: People who lower their BP to a normal 120/80 or less by adopting a healthier lifestyle may *reduce* their risk of dementia.

The prevention and control of HBP are “the best hope we have right now” for protecting the brain, says Lewis Kuller, MD, DPH, professor of epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health.

Dr. Kuller was the lead researcher on a significant study, recently published in the *Journal of Clinical Hypertension*, which showed increased brain lesions—also found in Alzheimer’s patients—developing over an eight-year period among post-menopausal women with HBP.

Other recent studies have tied HBP to dementia and mental decline among men. They also have demonstrated that certain prescription medicines for hypertension—*angiotensin receptor blockers* and *ACE inhibitors*—can decrease Alzheimer’s risk. Next fall may see the start of still more conclusive research, when the National Institutes of Health launches a nationwide, nine-year clinical trial to determine whether lowering *systolic blood pressure*—the top number of BP readings—below the recommended 120 “normal” rate can further shrink the risk.

Start now

But you don’t have to wait to take preventive action. Get your blood pressure under control now. While BP is influenced by age and heredity, making small changes in diet and exercise can make a real difference.

“Lifestyle *does* matter,” says Robert Bonow, MD, the Goldberg Distinguished Professor at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. He cites the importance of getting 30 minutes of exercise every day (including normal activities like climbing stairs), losing excess weight, eating more fruits and vegetables, and consuming less salt.

A recent report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* estimated that cutting the amount of salt in the diet was as crucial as quitting smoking to stave off strokes, heart attacks and heart disease. Most of the salt you ingest—more than twice the recommended levels of 1,500-2,300 milligrams per day—comes from processed foods, so you can start by going easy on those.

There’s much more you can do to benefit your blood pressure, your body and your brain. Ask your doctor to check your blood pressure today. Consult with her or him about which choices in our “ABCs of Heart Health” are right for you (*see page 22*). Above all, says Dr. Bonow, “don’t give up!”

—Lynn Langway