



The low-down on high blood pressure

Why the early diagnosis and effective treatment of high blood pressure is so vital...

High blood pressure (hypertension) is a very common condition affecting about 30% of all adults and at least 50% of those over the age of 60. For those who have the condition, early diagnosis and proper treatment is important, as it is one of the most significant preventable causes of early disease and death.

Measuring blood pressure

Blood pressure is the force within the arteries which moves blood from the heart around the body, and a certain degree of pressure is essential for life as, without it, the blood would stop flowing. The pressure is generated by the pumping of the heart, and not only varies from one person to another, but also alters from moment to moment within each individual depending, for instance, on whether they are relaxed or anxious.

A typical blood pressure reading will be, for example, 130/80; the higher figure (called the systolic) being the pressure within the arteries when the heart is contracting and the lower figure (the diastolic) being the pressure when the heart is filling with blood.

Causes of 'hypertension'

The cause of high blood pressure is still unknown in 95% of cases, although there does seem to be an inherited element since most people can point to a close family member who also has high blood pressure. In the other 5% of cases it is caused by generally rare conditions such as narrowing of the arteries to the kidneys and certain adrenal gland disorders.

The long term effects

Unlike most other medical conditions, high blood pressure generally gives no symptoms until it has already caused

damage to organs such as the heart, brain or kidneys and, as a result, there is likely to be a significant number of people in the UK with hypertension who are unaware that they have it.

The reason high blood pressure is so important to detect and treat is that it significantly increases the risk of suffering from heart disease or a stroke. This is mainly because of its effect on the arteries of the body, as it contributes, along with other factors such as smoking and high blood cholesterol levels, to 'furring up' within the blood vessels. Hypertension can also affect the kidneys and there is increasing evidence that it is linked to certain types of dementia.

Early diagnosis - simple treatment

Fortunately, the diagnostic test for hypertension is a simple blood pressure check which is usually repeated a number of times on different occasions before the diagnosis is confirmed. Therefore it is advisable for everyone, especially as they get older, to have their blood pressure checked at least every 5 years.

Treatment may start with making some lifestyle changes such as eating a healthy diet low in fat and salt, taking regular exercise and not smoking. (Although smoking does not increase blood pressure, it does significantly increase the risk of having a heart attack or stroke.)

In most cases medication will be required in order to lower the blood pressure sufficiently. There are now a number of different types of prescribed anti-hypertensive medication and, although most hypertension sufferers will need more than one type in order to fully control their blood pressure, the doctor will usually be able to find a

combination that gives few or no side effects.

Although no one likes to take long term medication, treating high blood pressure dramatically reduces the risks attached to it. For instance, lowering someone's blood pressure by 5 for a 5 year period produces a 35% to 40% reduction in their risk of having a stroke and a 20% to 25% reduction in their chances of suffering a heart attack. Since older people are at greatest risk of suffering from these, they are the group who will benefit the most from controlling high blood pressure.

Hypertension and private medical insurance

It is likely that most private medical insurance providers will exclude cover for hypertension if you had the condition prior to taking out a policy. However Saga can now include cover for people with hypertension, subject to an additional premium and the completion of a simple health declaration.

Saga Private Medical Insurance offers a range of HealthPlans providing different levels of cover, all of which provide the option to include high blood pressure. Find out more by calling 0800 096 4083, stating reference S5D10. If you take out a policy before 31 January 2006 they will send you a free blood pressure monitor.

