Young, have hypertension ? How to cope? [1]

Dear Alice,

I'm a 30 year old male finishing graduate school (PhD) who has just been diagnosed with case of hypertension. My blood pressure is 140-100. I think that's rather high. I've been feeling under the clouds the last couple of weeks, started with a flu that has since progressed into a cold. My throat has a lot of phlegm and I think it's caused by an allergic reaction to ragweed. Coupled with other stresses in life, I guess I'm kinda weak and depressed. My question is, what should I do? The doctor said I should change my diet ? less salt and fat. Will exercise help and is the high blood pressure a temporary thing? Perhaps when I feel better and the stresses are gone, my blood pressure will come back to normal. I'm not overweight, but I do have very bad eating habits. I also have a family history of hypertension. Please help ? advice on diet, etc. I am tired of feeling weak. Thanks.

?TENSE

Answer

Dear TENSE,

Everyone feels under the weather sometimes, but it sounds like your rainy day has turned into a full-blown season. Following your health care provider's nutrition recommendations and finding ways to reduce your stress level are two ways to clear the clouds and improve your health. If you don't feel better soon, head on back to the office for another check-up.

Hypertension is the medical term for high blood pressure, which occurs when blood pushes too hard against the walls of your veins and arteries. Health experts aren't sure what exactly causes hypertension, but there are several ways to control your condition and improve your overall health. (For more background on hypertension, check out What do blood pressure numbers mean? [2] in the Go Ask Alice! General Health [3] archive.)

High blood pressure has been linked to low physical activity, being overweight, and consuming too much salt or alcohol. In addition, stress can impact blood pressure directly and indirectly. When you're experiencing stress, tension may cause your blood pressure to spike, but only temporarily. Over the long run, stress may act more as a mediating factor by fostering unhealthy eating and inactivity, which in turn raises your blood pressure as well.

It's tempting to take a "wait and see" approach and hope that your blood pressure and other life stressors will improve on their own. However, you may see results more quickly if you
tackle these problems head on? especially if hypertension and/or chronic stress have been ongoing issues for you. First, it may be helpful to identify the source(s) of your stress and then take steps to help yourself relax. Exercise, adequate rest, deep breathing, and a variety of other relaxation techniques can keep stress at bay and boost your energy.

In addition to managing stress, here are some specific lifestyle changes that may help lower your blood pressure:

- **Exercise regularly.** Aim for 150 minutes of physical activity per week, or about 30 minutes a day for five days. You can break this up into segments of as little as 10 minutes at a time and still gain the benefits of exercise.
- **Eat well.** Stock up on fresh fruits and veggies and low-fat dairy, and cut down on fatty and salty foods.
- If you have diabetes, **keep your blood sugar under control.**
- **Trim down** if you are overweight. Excess weight strains the heart. In some cases, weight loss may be the only treatment needed to reduce your blood pressure.
- **Avoid smoking.**
- If you drink, **limit yourself to one or two alcohol servings a day.**

Adapted from **National Institutes of Health** [4].

Along with lifestyle changes, there are also medications available that can help pull down your blood pressure. If you would like discuss medication options, it would be best to contact your health care provider. If those other emotional stressors are getting to you, then you may also want to consider talking with a therapist about how you’re feeling.

It may take time to lower your blood pressure and your stress level, but adopting healthier behaviors like regular exercise and a low-salt diet may brighten your outlook, help you feel better, and bring back your energy levels.

Alice!

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