

Hypertension — the silent killer

Heal

By Meera Murugesan

WE love food and avoid exercise. We eat at any time of the day and relish meals high in salt, sugar and fat.

Is it any wonder that more and more Malaysians are finding themselves added to the list of those with diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension?

About 3 in 10 adults in Malaysia (or 6.4 million people) have hypertension, according to the 2019 Health and Morbidity Survey.

It increases the likelihood of stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney failure and death if left untreated.

In most people with hypertension, the cause cannot be identified, says Gleneagles Hospital Kuala Lumpur cardiologist Dr Chong Wei Peng.

This is known as primary hypertension. But, even though an underlying cause cannot be identified, most affected individuals have one or more of these risk factors: a family history of hypertension, overweight or obese, excessive dietary salt and alcohol intake.

Dr Chong says in a minority of hypertensive patients, the condition is due to an underlying problem such as kidney failure, narrowing of the kidney arteries (renal artery stenosis), or certain hormonal disorders. This is

categorised as secondary hypertension and is more common among younger people.

Some individuals with secondary hypertension may be cured if the underlying problems can be treated or eliminated.

THE HIDDEN DANGER

The likelihood of cardiovascular complications such as stroke, heart attack or heart failure increases with blood pressure.

"The condition generally does not cause symptoms and most people are without symptoms even when their blood pressure is markedly elevated," says Dr Chong.

Hence, regular blood pressure measurement is the only reliable way to diagnose and monitor hypertension.

Hypertension is known as the "silent killer" because most people will feel fine in spite of it, says International Medical University family medicine specialist Associate Professor Dr Verna Lee Kar Mun.

"Ignoring it can lead to serious complications and once warning signs set in, such as blurred vision, giddiness, chest pain and breathing difficulty, these means complications are already happening."

Hypertension must be controlled



Dr Chong Wei Peng



Associate Professor Dr Verna Lee Kar Mun

and treated to minimise cardiovascular complications.

Studies have shown that the risk is lower when blood pressure is kept at least below 140/90mmHg, preferably below 130/80mmHg.

Lifestyle modifications such as quitting smoking, reducing dietary salt and alcohol intake, regular exercise and losing weight can lower systolic blood pressure by 2-5mmHg.

Dr Chong says these must be practised consistently to achieve the desired effects. Lifestyle changes will also complement medication and

help keep dosages to the minimum.

Blood pressure-lowering medications remain the most studied, proven and effective treatment. There are different types of medication. Each lowers blood pressure by a different mechanism. Hence, different types can be used

in combination to lower blood pressure more effectively.

"Many patients are concerned about the long-term effects of these medications on their kidney and liver functions. The fact is that by lowering blood pressure, these medications protect the kidneys from being damaged by persistently high blood pressure," says Dr Chong.

Dr Lee says sometimes, patients are reluctant to be honest with their doctors. Some don't mention that they're taking herbal supplements or traditional Chinese medicine, while others don't tell that they've stopped taking prescribed medications over fears of side effects.

There is a silver lining with hypertension though. It can be reversed with lifestyle changes. One can start by taking small measures such as using the stairs instead of an elevator or parking farther away from one's destination to walk and move more. Reducing the amount of sauce and gravy in meals also helps, as these are often high in sodium.

"While it takes discipline and time, it is possible to manage blood pressure without the use of medications in the long run," says Dr Lee.

In the meantime, it is important for patients to take prescribed medications without changing the dose or frequency.

Hypertension is a chronic condition and daily medication is important to manage it, she adds.



Reducing dietary salt is one of the ways to reduce blood pressure.

IMAGE BY 8PHOTO — FREEPIK

DIAGNOSING HYPERTENSION

HYPERTENSION is diagnosed when one's blood pressure is persistently elevated at 140/90mmHg or higher. This is the level that increases the risk of developing cardiovascular complications.

Blood pressure reading is described in two numbers. The higher one is systolic pressure generated when your heart beats, forcing blood to circulate around your body. The lower one is diastolic pressure, which is the lowest your blood pressure reaches when your heart relaxes between beats.

Blood pressure fluctuates throughout the day. It is higher when one is engaged in physical activity, under emotional distress, or in pain. It is lower when one is at rest or asleep.

In an individual with hypertension, the blood pressure remains above 140/90mmHg most of the time.

Hence, we need multiple blood pressure measurements over a period of time to diagnose hypertension.

DIFFERENT STAGES OF HYPERTENSION

Mild — blood pressure is 140-160/90-100mmHg

Moderate — blood pressure is 160-180/100-110mmHg

Severe — blood pressure is 180/110mmHg or higher. The risk is highest at levels above 180/110mmHg.



We need multiple blood pressure measurements over a period of time to diagnose hypertension. IMAGE BY FREEPIK