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A nurse's visit helps keep high blood pressure in check

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By Chandra Wilson

It's American Heart Month, and there's no better time to raise awareness of the signs of hypertensive heart disease (HHD), which is better known as hypertension, or elevated blood pressure. Hypertension is often called the "silent killer" because, as reported by the American Heart Association (AHA), nearly half of all Americans have hypertension, and many don't even realize it.

The facts are clear. HHD is the leading cause of death for all Americans. For African American men and women, the risk for developing HHD is even higher, as roughly 40 percent are estimated to have high blood pressure. The condition increases with age, and if not properly managed can lead to heart failure, coronary artery disease, kidney failure, and other serious health issues.

However, with early diagnosis and proper treatment, hypertension is reversible.

Ruth Caballero, RN, a public health nurse with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York for more than two decades, provides home health care for people of all ages living in Washington Heights, Harlem and other areas of the City. She shares the following insights into the risks, signs and treatment of hypertension that may be useful for you or someone you love.

What is hypertension?

Hypertension exists when the pressure of blood pushing against blood vessel walls is too high. When blood pressure is elevated, it's comparable to pressure cooker that affects all organs, resulting in a greater risk of stroke, renal failure, and congestive heart failure.

What are the signs of hypertension?

Warning signs of hypertension include headache and swelling in the hands and feet. It is most prevalent in people who eat a lot of salt, fried food and fast food. Hypertension affects people of all ages, weights, ethnicities, and fitness levels. It is imperative to see a doctor if these warning signs appear.

How does a patient get diagnosed?

A simple blood pressure test can determine whether or not someone has hypertension. If the top number reads above 160 and the bottom is higher than 80 for three consecutive blood pressure readings, the diagnosis is hypertension and treatment should start immediately.

How is hypertension treated?

New York City residents come from diverse backgrounds, and many traditional foods are high in salt and fat, increasing their risk for hypertension. Caballero works with her patients to modify traditional recipes to make them heart healthy.

"The first thing I do during home visits is bring my hypertension patients a low salt diet booklet, then we go into the kitchen together and go through the cabinets to see what seasonings they have," said Caballero. She teaches patients how to substitute healthy alternatives to high-salt seasonings, how they can prepare their favorite dishes by baking, not frying, and how to incorporate more green, leafy vegetables.

According to Caballero, "The patients who have agreed to these changes, along with taking their medication, see their blood pressure normalize within a week or two."

What other lifestyle changes should hypertension patients consider?

Stop smoking and move! If you smoke, try to stop. According to the CDC, smoking is a primary cause of coronary heart disease. In fact, your risk of heart attack falls to about half that of a smoker in just one year after quitting.

For exercise, even if you can't get outdoors to walk, moderate activity can help reduce your risk of developing heart disease. If you're able, try marching in place while watching TV. Taking short indoor walks – even to the mailbox can help!

Can hypertension be safely managed in the long term?

By developing good eating habits, eliminating bad habits like drinking and smoking, and establishing a regular exercise routine, hypertension patients see vast improvements in their health, with many eventually coming off their high blood pressure medications.

“Home Care nurses are also teachers. It’s one of the most important things we do. My goal is to instruct a patient and their family how to live effectively,” said Caballero. “It touches my heart to see a patient stabilized because now this person has increased their life span.”

While American Heart Month is a great time to begin implementing heart healthy habits, it is important to keep up with these lifestyle improvements throughout the year. As always, consult your health provider before making significant changes.

If you or someone you know is looking for information about hypertension, in addition to talking to a healthcare professional, visit this CDC list of resources compiled from a number of organizations, as well as VNSNY’s Managing High Blood Pressure Self Care Guide.

Learn more about how home health care can support your well-being by visiting www.VNSNY.org or calling 1-800-675-0391.