May is National High Blood Pressure Education Month and a perfect time to take inventory of what you know about high blood pressure. High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, increases your risks for heart disease, kidney disease and the possibility of having a stroke. Heart disease is the number one killer of men and women in the United States. Stroke is the third most common cause of death in this country.

According to Linda B. Bobroff, Ph.D. RD, LD/N, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS – Extension, about one in every three American adults has high blood pressure. Hypertension is not hard to understand, but it is often taken lightly, because there are few, if any symptoms that plague us. It is often called the silent killer as it goes undetected for years. People may not realize they have a problem until they have a stroke or heart attack.

What is blood pressure? Blood is carried from our heart to the organs in our body through arteries. Every time our heart beats it pumps blood into the arteries. Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against the walls of the arteries.

Try to picture water forcing its way through a clogged hose. That image presents a clear picture of what happens inside arteries if we have high blood pressure. In clogged arteries blood has to push (high pressure) to get through to reach its final destination of muscles, tissues, heart or brain.

In medical terms blood pressure readings are written as two numbers; the systolic pressure (when the heart beats) over the diastolic pressure (when the heart relaxes between beats). High blood pressure is more serious as the numbers get higher. The following table shows categories of blood pressure (BP) levels in adults:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blood Pressure Category</th>
<th>Systolic BP</th>
<th>Diastolic BP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal Blood Pressure</td>
<td>less than 120</td>
<td>and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Hypertension</td>
<td>120-139</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 Hypertension</td>
<td>140-159</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 Hypertension</td>
<td>160 and greater</td>
<td>or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you are diagnosed with pre-hypertension, this means you are at risk for high blood pressure and should take steps to lower it. It is normal for your blood pressure to vary depending on what you are doing. For example, when you sleep, your pressure goes down or if you are exerting yourself, your blood pressure goes up.

Some people have blood pressure that stays high most or all of the time. If left untreated this continual higher-than-normal force of pressure against the walls of the arteries can lead to serious medical issues such as; arteriosclerosis or hardening of the arteries, heart attack, kidney damage, impaired vision, and stroke.

There are certain risk factors for developing high blood pressure over which we have no control; race, gender and heredity. For example, the condition is more common for African Americans than other races. In early years, men have high blood pressure more often than women. But as men and women age, the opposite is true. After menopause more women than men of the same age have hypertension. The number of both men and women with high blood pressure increases rapidly as we age. More than half of Americans over the age of 65 have high blood pressure.

Let’s do not forget how heredity can affect our health. If your parents or grandparents had high blood pressure, then your risk of developing the condition is higher than if you have no family history.
According to Dr. Bobroff, everyone – regardless of race, age, sex or heredity – can help lower their chance of developing hypertension though the control of some lifestyle behaviors. Here’s how:

- Aim for a healthy weight.
- Get moving and be physically active everyday.
- Choose and prepare food with less salt (sodium).
- Eat more fruits (at least 2 cups) and vegetables (at least 2 1/2 cups) each day.
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.

Take stock of your heart health during National High Blood Pressure Education month and take the necessary steps to protect it. Your life depends on it!


If you have a question, write to Jo Shuford-Law, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS Extension--Leon County, 615 Paul Russell Road, Tallahassee, FL 32301-7099; or call the Extension Office 487-3006, between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m. weekdays.

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