High Blood Pressure in African Americans

High blood pressure is often referred to as a "silent killer." Often people do not go for treatment because there are no signs of disease. Many people with high blood pressure do not feel sick, but they may have damage to their body that could cause major problems later.

- High blood pressure affects more than 40 percent of African Americans.
- High blood pressure develops earlier in life and is often more severe when not treated. Blood pressure should be checked regularly to know when it is high.
- Stroke, heart disease, and kidney failure all can result from high blood pressure.
- Some African Americans carry a gene that makes them salt sensitive. Even small amounts of salt can greatly raise blood pressure.

About Your Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is a measure of the pressure of the blood in your arteries. Your arteries are tubes that carry blood from your heart to the rest of your body. When your blood pressure is high, this makes your heart work harder. Over time, high blood pressure can cause you to be more likely to have a heart attack, stroke, or kidney failure.

When your blood pressure is checked, two numbers are recorded. You may hear the nurse or the doctor say, "Your blood pressure is 120 over 80."
The top number is called the systolic pressure. This is the pressure when your heart is pumping. The bottom number is called the diastolic pressure. This is the pressure between beats, when your heart is resting. The harder it is for your blood to flow, the higher the blood pressure numbers will be.

Normal blood pressure is less than 120 systolic over 80 diastolic. A blood pressure of 140 or higher systolic or 90 or higher diastolic with repeat checks over time by your doctor or nurse is considered high blood pressure. Some people may have signs of high blood pressure, such as:

- Frequent headaches
- Feeling tired
- Blurred vision
- Shortness of breath

**How is high blood pressure treated?**

Your doctor may order medicine to help control your blood pressure. Take your medicine even if you start to feel better. **Never stop taking your medicine without first talking to your doctor.**

You can also help lower your blood pressure by making a few lifestyle changes, such as:

- Lose weight if you are overweight and reduce fatty or fried foods in your diet.
- Lower your salt intake.
- Exercise every day. Talk with your doctor about an exercise program.
- Stop smoking or other tobacco use.
- Reduce stress.

Controlling high blood pressure is even more important if you are a smoker, or have diabetes, high cholesterol, or a family history of stroke or heart disease. **Have your blood pressure, cholesterol, and overall heart health checked at least once a year.**

For more information on high blood pressure, ask your doctor or nurse.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.