

# Hypertension

## how to avoid a common but misunderstood condition

by Bolanle Idowu

**Hypertension is a common condition also known as high blood pressure; it is usually diagnosed when a patient's blood pressure is higher than the universally accepted level.**

### How do I know I have it?

One of the most peculiar characteristic of this condition is that there are usually no known symptoms. This results in the disease often remaining under-diagnosed and undertreated, therefore the discovery of the disease is left to a large extent to routine checks at the GP or the hospital. Another major trait is that it is usually hereditary (i.e. runs in the family).

Sometimes it presents itself with recurring headaches or eye problems; whereas in some instances it is presented only when complications such as a stroke, heart attack and kidney damage or failure have already set in as a result.

If hypertension is part of your family history; especially if your mother, father or other siblings had it, and you are aged 35 and above, you should see your GP or nurse for a check up as soon as possible, with repeat checks needed every one to five years depending on circumstances. It usually takes about three readings, on different occasions, before diagnosis as blood pressure can fluctuate and rise temporarily.

### What causes it?

In 95% of cases, there is no identifiable cause and this is known as essential hypertension. This can be associated with other health matters such as diabetes, kidney disease and indeed pregnancy; causing the need for people in these categories to be checked regularly. Other factors cause it as well. The use of steroids for instance can lead to an increase in one's blood pressure, and the aging process can also induce hypertension. An unhealthy lifestyle does play a major role in increasing ones' risk factor to the disease i.e. obesity, or a sedentary lifestyle with little or no exercise (couch potatoes). Statistically it has been recorded to be more common among black people (the Afro Caribbean community), although it affects all races.

### What can be done?

If suspected or diagnosed, your doctor will likely run some tests including an ECG which is a tracing of the heart to check if it is already suffering under the stress of the high blood pressure, Kidney function/scan, liver function, cholesterol screen for diabetes and more or less tests depending on the individuals' history.



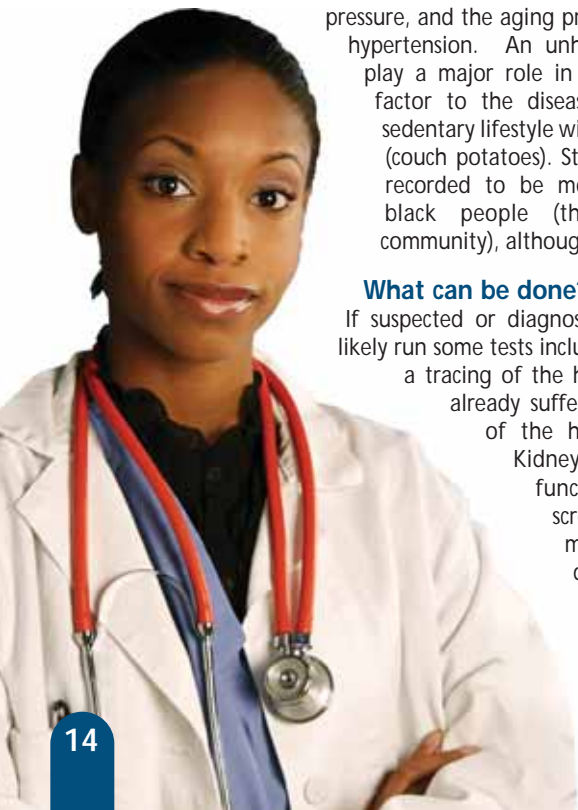
### Treatment

Education about the condition is very important, lifestyle changes may be all that is needed in some cases.

- Regular exercise –minimum 30mins at least 3 times a week
- Reduce salt intake
- Stop smoking
- Reduce caffeine
- Eat well – i.e. 5 portions of fruit and vegetables, avoid fat and frying, boil and steam food, eat only a small amount of red meat, try fish/chicken without the skin.etc
- Keep weight within acceptable limit for height i.e. maintain a BMI (Body Mass Index) of not more than 24
- Stress management

In addition to the above, medication may be necessary and it must be taken every day without fail; until the doctor says otherwise. However, usually you may need to take it for life; type of medication depends on age, race and associated issues.

In summary, Hypertension is a common condition that is easily diagnosed and treatable. However it can be avoided by maintaining a healthy lifestyle. It must not be ignored as it can kill or cause other serious problems.



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