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Why are more young adults getting high blood pressure?



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Q I notice that more young adults are being diagnosed with high blood pressure these days. Why is that happening and how do we keep our blood pressure within the healthy range in our fast-paced lives?

A High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, refers to the condition in which the blood is pumped around the body at too high a pressure.

In Singapore, a person is diagnosed with hypertension if his blood pressure reading is over 140/90 mmHg on more than three separate occasions.



Three major factors

According to the Ministry of Health database in 2010, about one in four (23.5 per cent) Singapore residents aged 18 to 69 years suffered from hypertension.

Although hypertension increases with age, its occurrence in younger people has increased significantly over the years, mainly due to three lifestyle factors:

1. Obesity

The average Singaporean today is 3kg heavier compared to 15 years ago, and is more likely to overeat. While children are putting on weight, the biggest weight gain actually begins when people start working.

■ **Prevention tips:** Reduce intake of high-calorie food, make healthy eating choices and allocate enough time for regular exercise.

2. High salt intake

Eating too much salt results in extra sodium in your blood, which will cause your body to retain more water. This raises your blood pressure and will put excessive stress on your heart, brain and kidneys.

Reducing your daily salt intake has a major beneficial effect on your cardiovascular health, along with healthcare cost savings.

■ Prevention tips:

Consider a long-term dietary-based plan such as the DASH (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) diet, which is rich in fruit, vegetables, grains and nuts, and low in salt.

Clinical trials have shown that it helps to reduce blood pressure significantly.

3. Excessive stress

In a busy and competitive society like Singapore, the stress level is generally high.

During a stressful situation, your body produces a surge of hormones, such as adrenaline, which temporarily increase your blood pressure by causing your heart to beat faster and the blood vessels to narrow.

■ **Prevention tips:** Get adequate sleep, avoid excessive drinking and stop smoking. Regular exercise is an excellent way to destress your body and normalise blood pressure level.

Hypertension treatment

For relatively younger patients

(aged below 40), doctors are more reluctant to start on long-term medications, but instead will focus on aggressive lifestyle modifications to return the patient's blood pressure to the healthy range.

These lifestyle changes include weight loss, low-salt diet and regular moderate exercise.

However, for patients who have moderate to severe hypertension, medication is of utmost importance to prevent end-organ damage such as heart failure, stroke and kidney damage.

Live an active lifestyle

A sedentary lifestyle can also cause high blood pressure.

Therefore, hypertensive patients are strongly encouraged to live an active lifestyle and participate in physical activities such as sports.

In general, it is safe to exercise despite high blood pressure except when the level of blood pressure is severely elevated (above 180/110 mmHg).

Depending on the individual patient's condition, most doctors would prefer to lower the patient's blood pressure with medications first before starting on an exercise programme.

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