

High blood pressure – the silent killer

by Hanlie du Plessis

Blood is carried from the heart to all parts of your body in vessels called arteries. Blood pressure is the force of the blood pushing against the walls of the arteries. Each time the heart beats, it pumps blood into the arteries.

Your blood pressure is at its highest when the heart beats, pumping the blood. This is called systolic pressure. When the heart is at rest, between beats, your blood pressure falls. This is the diastolic pressure. Blood pressure is always given as these two numbers – the systolic and diastolic pressure. Both are important.

Blood pressure changes during the day. It is at its lowest as you sleep and rises when you get up. It can also rise when you are excited, nervous or active. With high blood pressure, the heart works harder, your arteries take a beating and your chances of a stroke, heart attack and kidney problems, are greater.

What causes high blood pressure?

A single specific cause is not known. It can be the result of another medical problem or medicine. Many people get high blood pressure as they grow older. Your chances of developing high blood pressure are bigger if you are overweight, a man over the age of 45, a woman over the age of 55 or if you have a family history of high blood pressure. Other causes are:

- Eating too much salt
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Not enough potassium in your diet
- Not enough exercise
- Taking certain medicines
- Long-lasting stress
- Smoking (which can cause a temporary rise in blood pressure).

Signs and symptoms

High blood pressure is called “the silent killer” because you can have it for years without knowing it. To find out if you have high blood pressure, your blood pressure must be measured. Even though there are usually no signs or symptoms, it is dangerous if it continues over time. Having your blood pressure taken is quick and easy. Your doctor or nurse will use a gauge, stethoscope or electronic sensor, and a blood pressure cuff.

Treatment

You can prevent or control high blood pressure by changing to healthier habits such as following a healthy eating plan, losing excess weight, exercising regularly, not smoking and drinking less alcohol.

Sometimes blood pressure stays too high even after a person made these healthy changes. In that case, it is necessary to use medicine to help lower the blood pressure. Medicines will control your blood pressure, but cannot cure it. You will need to take blood pressure medicine for a long time. **um**