



Make a DASH to lower your blood pressure

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In medical circles, high blood pressure (aka hypertension) is known as the "Silent Killer". That's because high blood pressure has few symptoms, but is so damaging to the heart and blood vessels that millions of heart attacks, kidney disease and strokes are linked to it each year. One of four Americans has high blood pressure and fewer than half are aware of the problem.

High blood pressure is detrimental to your health because it makes your heart work harder and damages arteries and organs over time.

A blood pressure level of 140/90 or higher is considered high. Blood pressure between 120/80 and 139/89 is considered "pre-hypertension" and should not be ignored. There is much you can do to bring your blood pressure down. You are in control of many high blood pressure risk factors including...

- High sodium intake
- Smoking
- Inactivity
- Consuming stimulants such as caffeine
- Not dealing with stress in a healthy way
- Overweight
- Poor eating habits

The last risk factor, poor eating habits, is one of the easiest ways to take control of high blood pressure.

This is great news, especially for those who want to avoid taking daily medication. A new eating plan called the DASH Diet may be the ticket whittling down those numbers.

DASH stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension and is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. The DASH Diet was not formulated for weight loss, but can easily be modified to help you shed pounds.

DASH focuses on limiting sodium intake and eating heart healthy foods. The diet calls for 7-8 servings of grains and grain products per day, 4-5 servings of vegetables and 4-5 servings of fruit. As for protein, the DASH Diet recommends 2-3 servings of low-fat or fat-free dairy foods and two or less servings of meat, poultry and fish. Sweets are to be held to one per day including jam, syrup, candy fruit, punch and lemonade.

Now, I know that high protein diets are all the rage for weight loss. But it takes more than weight loss to have a healthy heart. Remember, the DASH Diet is a way of eating that strengthens the heart and kidneys. How is that done? Through consumption of whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

These three food groups are major sources of fiber and have little sodium. In fact, only a small amount of sodium occurs naturally in foods. Most is added during processing, so check labels, especially on canned and processed cereals, fruits and vegetables. According to the latest research, these three food groups are the backbone of a heart healthy diet.

As for meat, it is a rich source of protein and magnesium. Unfortunately, it's the fat and cholesterol which often accompanies meat that puts the heart and kidneys into fits. It is true that the body needs some fat and oils to run optimally. However, adding excess fat can also add pounds and being overweight is another risk factor that increases blood pressure.

In fact, being overweight has such a big impact on high blood pressure, that losing just 10 pounds can bring your numbers down. The DASH Diet can easily be modified to not only be heart smart, but help you drop pounds.

If you're interested in the DASH Diet, check out the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute website at www.nhlbi.nih.gov and type in DASH Diet. They will send you one free copy of the diet and study. Before starting DASH, or any diet, you should talk with your healthcare provider.