High Blood Pressure

and Heart Disease and Stroke

High blood pressure is one of the major risk factors for heart disease – the leading cause of death in Missouri. It is also the leading risk factor for stroke – the third most common cause of death and the leading cause of disability in the state.

In Missouri, 29.4 percent of adults have high blood pressure. The percent is even higher for African-Americans, at 41.9 percent.[1]

Maintaining a normal blood pressure can decrease your chances of having a heart attack or stroke and reduce your risk for disability and premature death.

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the artery walls. Blood pressure commonly rises and falls during the day, but when it stays high for too long, it can cause problems to major organs including the heart, kidneys and eyes.

Blood pressure is usually recorded as two numbers:
- The top (systolic) number represents the pressure while the heart muscle is contracting.
- The bottom (diastolic) number represents the pressure while the heart is resting between beats.

When is blood pressure considered high?

- A normal blood pressure reading is 120/80.
- A blood pressure reading that is greater than 140/90 is considered high.
- A person who has a blood pressure reading higher than 120/80 but less than 140/90 is considered to have pre-hypertension and is at serious risk for developing high blood pressure.

People of all ages can develop high blood pressure.

High blood pressure is sometimes called the "silent killer" because it usually has no symptoms until serious problems develop. However, the condition is easily detected and treated.

You are at greater risk for developing high blood pressure if you are: overweight or obese, have high cholesterol, have diabetes, consume too much salt and not enough potassium, drink too much alcohol or smoke.

Controlling your blood pressure

While ethnicity and a family history of high blood pressure also increase your risk, there are a number of things you can do to help keep your blood pressure at a healthy level:
- Have your blood pressure checked regularly. If it is high, be sure to follow your doctor's recommendations for treating it.
- Take your medications as prescribed.
- Monitor cholesterol levels.
- Control diabetes.
- Be physically active.
- Eat a healthy diet to promote a healthy weight.
- Avoid smoking and excessive alcohol use.

More information can be found at:
- www.dhss.mo.gov/HighBloodPressure/
- www.dhss.mo.gov/HeartDisease/
- www.dhss.mo.gov/Stroke/

Data Source: 1. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2007, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention