

High Blood Pressure Medicines: The Low Down on Wisely Taking These Medicines

High blood pressure medicines are known to decrease the risk of heart attacks and strokes, but they often are not taken as prescribed. This NewsCapsule seeks to clarify the benefits of high blood pressure medicines and encourage their use by those diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Who needs high blood pressure medicines?

Blood pressure is the force of blood as it moves through blood vessels. When the heart beats, the pressure is called the systolic blood pressure. When the heart is relaxing between beats the force is called the diastolic blood pressure. So blood pressure is recorded as two numbers:

Systolic blood pressure
Diastolic blood pressure

High blood pressure is defined by having a systolic blood pressure of 140 or higher or a diastolic blood pressure of 90 or higher. The numbers below all show high blood pressure:

| | | |
|------------|------------|------------|
| <u>156</u> | <u>130</u> | <u>160</u> |
| 86 | 94 | 100 |

Since blood pressure can be affected by activity and stress, a diagnosis of high blood pressure is usually given after three blood pressure readings are high on three different days.

Some people can lower their blood pressure by decreasing salt intake, lowering their weight or exercising more. Many people, however, need medicines to lower their blood pressure to a safe level.

What do high blood pressure medicines do?

Different blood pressure medicines lower blood pressure in different ways. Some get rid of extra sodium and water from the body, others relax blood vessels by affecting hormones or nerve impulses, and others slow the heart rate so the blood passes through blood vessels with less force. Be sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist how *your* medicine works.

Because different blood pressure medicines work in different ways, if one medicine does not work well for you, it's worthwhile to try a different medicine. Use of more than one medicine can work well. It can also lower the risk of side effects that can occur when high doses of a single medicine are used.

Which medicine should be prescribed for you?

Unfortunately, no one can predict which blood pressure medicine will work best for you. Be patient. A medication may need to be taken for at least two weeks before its full benefits are known. During that time, side effects that happened during the first days of treatment may actually lessen or go away as your body adjusts to the medicine.

How should blood pressure medicines be taken?

Blood pressure medicines need to be taken daily at the same time every day. If you are taking multiple blood pressure medicines, it might be a good idea to take some in the morning and others in the evening. This may prevent nausea and dizziness.

Skipping doses or stopping your medicine will cause your blood pressure to increase. Normal blood pressure readings usually mean that your blood pressure medicine is doing its job; not that it is no longer needed.

How do I know if my medicine is working?

The best way to tell if your medicine is working is to have your blood pressure checked. Many pharmacists will help you choose a good home blood pressure monitor and teach you how to use it.

The American Heart Association Blood Pressure Tracker provides instructions about taking your blood pressure at home and includes a form for recording readings. Here is the link to this useful site:

<http://www.americanheart.org/downloadable/heart/1233850982588bphtracker.pdf>

Most of the time there are no symptoms with high blood pressure. You should still take your medicine even if you don't feel like your blood pressure is high.

What's a good blood pressure reading?

The goal of high blood pressure treatment is to keep the blood pressure below 140/90. Many recommend that the blood pressure should be close to 120/80 for maximum benefits. Diabetes carries a high risk for heart problems, so the blood pressure goal for people with diabetes is less than 130/80. Patients with kidney disease also have a goal of less than 130/80.

Preventing side effects

Here are some tips on how to prevent or minimize the most common side effects. For each blood pressure medicine you are taking, ask your doctor or pharmacist about its side effects and ways to prevent them.

Nausea or stomach upset Take the medicine with meals or snacks.

Dizziness When getting up from bed, sit for a minute before standing. When getting up from a chair, stand for a minute, then walk.

Tiredness Take the medicine before bedtime. Ask for another medicine if tiredness is bothersome.

Dry, consistent cough Only occurs with some medicines, call your doctor to get a new medicine.

Leg cramps Occurs with medicines that lower potassium; ask your doctor if you need a potassium supplement, have your potassium level checked through a blood test.

Irregular heart beats Occurs with medicines that increase potassium in the blood, avoid salt-substitutes that contain potassium if taking these medicines, have your potassium level checked through a blood test.

If side effects occur, call your doctor before stopping the medicine. He or she can usually prescribe a different medicine that may not cause the same problem.

Drug interactions with high blood pressure medicines

Some prescription medicines, OTC (non-prescription medicines), herbal products and dietary supplements can cause your blood pressure to increase (or go too low) or can increase the chance for side effects from high blood pressure medicines.

How can you prevent interactions from occurring? Ask your pharmacist about possible interactions with medicines, herbals and foods when you:

- Receive a new blood pressure medicine
- Refill your blood pressure medicine (a good time to check for new scientific information or warnings about blood pressure medicines)
- Select an OTC product
- Consider an herbal product or dietary supplement

Having an up-to-date medication list can also prevent drug interactions. (See the May JustAskBlue News Capsule for more information). Having your list checked when a new medicine is prescribed is important since some high blood pressure medicines have multiple names. For example, Cardizem, Tiazac and Diltiazem are all the same medicine.

More questions?

Here are some good websites that provide information about high blood pressure and its treatment.

The site offers an interactive tutorial about high blood pressure. It defines high blood pressure, discusses its causes and consequences, and treatment.

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/hypertension/htm/index.htm>

Your Guide to Lowering Blood pressure provides information about weight loss, diet and exercise in addition to general information about high blood pressure and its treatment.

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/hbp_low/hbp_low.pdf

Blood pressure and Your Health gives an overview of high blood pressure including tips for measuring your blood pressure at home.

http://www.ash-us.org/patient_edu/pdffiles/BloodPressureHealthEnglish.pdf

Interested in more websites or have a specific questions about your high blood pressure medicine? Click on <http://www.justaskblue.com> and send us your information request.