

Relieving the pressure of heart disease

On April 7 each year, the World Health Organization (WHO) selects and highlights a major world health issue. This year the theme is *High Blood Pressure*.

Of course, having some blood pressure is vitally important. It's what keeps those life- sustaining, oxygenated red blood cells circulating around our body. But too much blood pressure can result in a catastrophic outcome – just like a pressure cooker on high heat without an escape valve.

Blood pressure is designated by two readings. The higher of these (the systolic) is a measure of the pressure when the heart is beating and the lower reading (the diastolic) is a measure of resting pressure – when the heart relaxes. Blood pressure is usually measured in millimetres of mercury – abbreviated to “mmHg” – and if the systolic reading is equal to or above 140 mmHg and/or the diastolic reading equal to or above 90 mmHg then the blood pressure is considered to be high.

Hypertension (the medical term for abnormally high blood pressure) has been designated by the WHO as one of the most serious risk factors for death worldwide. It is estimated that about 30% of Australian adults have hypertension; and most of these people are receiving no treatment.

What makes hypertension so serious is that, well before the explosive heart attack or stroke occurs, there is underlying, sometimes irreparable damage done to the cardiovascular system, the kidneys and the brain. Also, hypertension, especially when combined with diabetes, significantly increases the risk of blindness.

In most cases the actual cause of high blood pressure can't be identified, but we do know what groups of people are most at risk of developing hypertension; and we do know ways whereby we can reduce the risk.

There are usually no symptoms of hypertension; at least generally not until the blood pressure reaches a sustained dangerous level. So, if there is a history in the family of heart disease, kidney disease or diabetes, a regular – at least yearly – check up with your GP is essential.

If you do have hypertension, regular and long term treatment with medication will most likely be a necessity. Understanding how these blood pressure medicines work is helpful; and your pharmacist can provide you with so-called Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) which explains the benefits and the occasional problems you may encounter. Uncomfortable side effects with anti-hypertensive therapy can sometimes be experienced, especially in the early stages of treatment, so it's nice to know what to expect.

For more information about hypertension ask for the *Blood Pressure* fact card at one of the nearly 2,000 pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. There are also cards on *Diabetes*, *Weight and Health*, *Exercise and the Heart*, and *Staying a Non-Smoker*.

Taking ownership of a medical condition will often help improve outcomes. With hypertension this can sometimes be achieved by the use of home blood pressure measuring devices. The modern machines are simple and easy to use. Check with your doctor whether one of these could be an advantage. And if you have trouble remembering to take your blood pressure tablets, a “dose administration aid” or medication blister pack could help.

It's as well to remember that there are some medicines – both prescription and non-prescription medicines – which can cause or worsen hypertension. This includes some pain relievers, anti-depressants, oral contraceptives, cough and cold products and various herbal preparations. If you have high blood pressure, always check first with your pharmacist before self selecting another medicine.

Meanwhile, for the location of the nearest pharmacy where you can pick up those Self Care fact cards, phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or log on to the website at www.psa.org.au and click on “Self Care” then “Find a Self Care Pharmacy”.