

HYPERTENSION: A Preventable-Treatable Killer of Blacks

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High blood pressure or hypertension is a preventable and treatable disease, even in the Black community. Unfortunately, this disease continues to kill and disable our community. It is present in almost 4 out of 10 Black adults, is the most common cause of death, stroke, heart failure, and the second leading cause of kidney failure behind diabetes. Nearly every Black person reading this article has a family member or close friend who has suffered one of the complications of high blood pressure.

Blacks in this country have one of the highest rates of hypertension in the world. However, we should note that US Blacks do not have the world's highest rate of hypertension. Countries of Eastern Europe have higher rates of hypertension than found in US Blacks, and Nigeria has one of the world's lowest rates of hypertension.

A major cause of hypertension in Blacks in this country is the diet that we eat. Foods containing salt and too many calories (also a major cause of obesity, diabetes, cancer, and high cholesterol, and their complications) are the major cause of hypertension. Unfortunately, our community has considered "soul food" (which is high in salt, calories, and fat) as part of its heritage. Thus, we have actually adopted foods that represented the scavenger droppings during slavery as something to be revered over the real soul foods of our proud ancestors in Africa (a diet very high in fruits and vegetables). In this way, slavery continues to kill our community. The usual fast food diets are just as bad.

Recent studies have shown that eating low salt diets that are high in fruits, vegetables, and low fat dairy products and no more than one meat dish per day can lower blood pressure as much as any single blood pressure medication. The greatest benefit was seen in Black patients in these studies. In those who have not yet developed hypertension, this diet can prevent or dramatically slow the development of hypertension.

Importantly, in those who already have hypertension, it can be controlled and the complications that devastate our community prevented. It is no longer acceptable to expect uncontrolled blood pressure in Black patients. Multiple studies now show that nearly every Black patient with hypertension can have their blood pressure controlled to the recommended goal of less than 140/90; yet less than 1 in 3 are at that goal. In those with higher blood pressure, it is because these patients are either not taking their medication or not prescribed enough of the correct medications by their providers. Most patients will require two and usually three medications to control their blood pressure. Especially in Blacks, one of the medications should be a water pill. They are most effective in lowering blood pressure and in preventing strokes, heart failure, kidney failure, and other cardiovascular complications of hypertension.

Lastly, each time you are seen, you should ask your provider for your blood pressure reading. If the top number (systolic blood pressure (SBP)) is higher than 140 or the bottom number (diastolic blood pressure (DBP)) is greater than 90 (less than 130/80 in those with diabetes or kidney disease), you should insist that something be done to lower it below that level.