



DEPARTMENT OF **PUBLIC HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

May 2025 Nutrition Article **National High Blood Pressure Education Month**

May is National High Blood Pressure Education Month and was first launched in 1974 by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI). It has been considered one of the most successful public health education programs in the world – primarily due to the statistical fact that high blood pressure, or hypertension, is a national problem in the United States.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reveal that in 2022, high blood pressure was a primary or contributing cause of over 685,000 deaths in the U.S. alone. It's also estimated that untreated high blood pressure cost the U.S. over \$130 billion over an average of 12 years (2003-2014). Unsurprisingly, high blood pressure is one of our nation's costliest health conditions.

High Blood Pressure Among Older Adults

High blood pressure is clearly a major health problem, but it is also concerning because it's common in older adults. According to the American College of Cardiology, 70 percent of adults over the age of 65 have hypertension. The prevalence of hypertension increases with age, not only due to lifestyle factors but also because the body's network of blood vessels, known as the vascular system, undergoes changes with age. Arteries get stiffer, causing blood pressure to go up.

This can be true even for people who have heart-healthy habits and feel just fine. High blood pressure, the "silent killer," often doesn't cause signs of illness that one sees or feels. That said, looking at specific lifestyle factors to determine risk can be helpful – like diet, exercise, not smoking, and moderating alcohol – as is regularly checking blood pressure levels with a blood pressure cuff to determine if the averages reveal any danger. If high blood pressure isn't controlled with lifestyle changes and medication, serious health problems can occur.

Symptoms of High Blood Pressure

Most people with high blood pressure have no symptoms. The Mayo Clinic has noted some people may experience headaches, shortness of breath, or nosebleeds. Severe high blood pressure, measured at 180/120 or higher, can cause symptoms such as severe headaches, chest pain, dizziness, difficulty breathing, nausea, vomiting, blurred vision, and anxiety. Extremely high blood pressure can even cause blood in the urine, in addition to the other symptoms.

High blood pressure is defined as a reading of 130/80. In older adults, the top number (systolic) is often 130 or higher, while the bottom number (diastolic) remains below 80. This problem, known as isolated systolic hypertension, occurs due to age-related stiffening of the major arteries. It is the most common form of high blood pressure in older adults and can lead to serious health issues, including shortness of breath during light physical activity, lightheadedness when standing too quickly, and an increased risk of falls.

Risks of High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure can affect anyone. Certain medical conditions can contribute to its development, while some individuals face a higher risk due to factors beyond their control, such as age, sex, race, and family history.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the greatest risks of uncontrolled high blood pressure in older adults include heart disease, stroke, kidney damage, vision loss, and cognitive decline, as well as isolated systolic hypertension. Eating too much salt is a primary risk factor when it comes to high blood pressure – along with lack of exercise, tobacco use, and excessive alcohol – but salt isn't unhealthy unless you eat too much of it.

A diet high in salt (sodium) causes fluid retention, leading to short-term swelling. Over time, excessive sodium intake can negatively impact kidney function and contribute to elevated blood pressure.

Nutrition and Lifestyle to Reduce High Blood Pressure

Dietary changes are vital in preventing high blood pressure in older adults, with an emphasis on nutrient-rich foods that promote heart health.

One of the biggest dietary changes older adults can make is to be more in control of their food – meaning preparing their own meals – rather than relying on pre-packaged, ready-to-eat meals and food prepared outside of the home in restaurants.

Sodium (aka: salt) serves as both a preservative and a flavor enhancer, but it can be hard to control when consuming pre-prepared foods. Eating out in cafeterias, restaurants, etc. will often result in excessive sodium intake, which can contribute to high blood pressure. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains – known popularly as the DASH diet – has been shown to help reduce blood pressure.

Be sure to always check the Nutrition Facts Label on common products that are salty (cheese, bread, processed foods) as the daily limit for older adults is recommended to be only about 1,500 mg/day.

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RECIPE OF THE MONTH

Chickpea Chicken Salad

As it starts to get hot, preparing healthy and quick meals can be a breeze!

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 cans of chickpeas, drained
- 1 red pepper, diced
- 1 cucumber, peeled and diced
- 1 large tomato, diced
- 1 large chicken breast, diced
- Handful of fresh parsley and dill, minced
- 2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 lemon, cut in half
- Salt and Pepper to taste

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Cook diced chicken in a pan with a drizzle of olive oil until it is no longer pink.
2. In a large bowl, add the chickpeas, red pepper, cucumber, tomato, chicken, parsley, and dill.
3. Drizzle with olive oil.
4. Squeeze juice of the lemon (both halves) over mixture.
5. Add salt and pepper to taste.
6. Mix all together.
7. Serve right away or chill for a crisper taste.

