Menopause and High Blood Pressure

by AFRA WILLMORE

Is There a Connection Between Menopause and High Blood Pressure?

You know you are getting older when conversation amongst friends turns into some weird competition about who is taking the most medication daily.

There's a twisted pride, it seems, in who is most broken and requires a body-rattling dose of pills to function. And don't start me on lotions and potions and patches and painkillers!

High blood pressure, otherwise known as hypertension, is one of those medical matters I notice is becoming more prevalent among my peers. There are of course a variety of reasons why blood pressure rises, but did you know that the menopause has been linked to this condition?

There is some debate as to why this might be. Some doctors believe it is (once again!) down to hormonal changes, which make a woman's blood pressure more sensitive to salt, leading to high blood pressure. Meanwhile, others are of the opinion it is more likely down to a natural increase in BMI (Body Mass Index) in menopausal women.

How High is High?

So when is blood pressure considered to be "high"?

Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg) and is recorded as two figures:

- **Systolic pressure –** the pressure of the blood when your heart beats to pump blood out
- **Diastolic pressure –** the pressure of the blood when your heart rests in between beats, which reflects how strongly your arteries are resisting blood flow

For example, if your healthcare provider says your blood pressure is "140 over 90", or 140/90mmHg, it means you have a systolic pressure of 140mmHg and a diastolic pressure of 90mmHg.

You are said to have high blood pressure readings on separate occasions consistently show your blood pressure to be 140/90mmHg or higher.

You don't have to go to your doctor to check your blood pressure – you can buy home-testing kits or many shops and chemists have facilities for you to drop in and get your blood pressure checked. These options are great if you suspect you suffer from "white coat syndrome" where even just being in a clinical situation raises your blood pressure.

One of the best ways to reduce your blood pressure is to make healthier diet choices. I can already hear you grumbling at the thought of cutting out your favourite treats. "Why does it matter if my blood pressure is a little

high?" I hear you ask.

Well high blood pressure can lead to all sorts of other problems. It is called the silent killer because it can lead to heart attack and/or stroke.

However, there is a wide range of reasons why your blood pressure might be high, so wherever you get tested, if your readings are even slightly high it is vital you see a doctor to find out the root cause. Your life may depend on it.

Next page: eating to reduce blood pressure.

Eating to Reduce Blood Pressure

If you find your blood pressure figures are rising it might be well worth cutting down on the salt in your diet. Avoid sprinkling it on your food obviously, but you also need to learn to look for hidden salt in food.

Processed food is particularly bad for containing hidden salt – surprisingly bread, soup, chicken nuggets, pizzas and ready-prepared Indian meals in the supermarket are amongst the worst culprits.

Instead, choose fresh ingredients and make your own. Soup is so easy and quick to prepare and once you have tasted the home-made version of your favourite flavor, canned and packet mixes will taste lifeless.

If you regularly eat take-out, it might be time to break the habit. Your pocket, waistline and blood pressure will thank you. Takeaway pizzas are the worst offenders, apparently containing almost two and a half times the amount of salt as the supermarket version. Some actually contain your entire daily recommended intake (or more) in one pizza! That's a whole teaspoon of salt in just one meal.

If you can't give up your slice, make it an occasional treat and choose toppings carefully - avoid pizzas topped with bacon, extra cheese or processed meat like salami or pepperoni.

Next on the salty list is Chinese food, followed by kebabs and Indian food. Cutting down on these types of takeout will lower your salt and fat intake.

Make sure you eat heart-healthy foods like whole-grains, fresh fruit and veg, make alcohol and caffeine based drinks an occasional treat and cut down or give up smoking - it's not just your blood pressure which will improve.

And let's face it, eating a healthier diet (not necessarily less food but making better choices) may well lead to weight loss. If it is weight gain that causes high blood pressure then this could help lower your figures – you will never know whether it was cutting out salty processed foods or weight loss, but as long as your blood pressure drops it doesn't really matter, does it?