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Healthy Lifestyle for Blood Pressure

by Bob Condor

(Seattle Post-Intelligencer) As a naturopathic physician, Nancy Welliver calls herself "really conservative" about helping patients to lower blood pressure. There are some 70 million Americans considered to have borderline high blood pressure or greater, partly because 2005 standards shortened the range of what's normal.

"I work with people on lifestyle issues before even thinking about herbs or other nutritional supplements," said Welliver, recently named chair of the botanical medicine department at Bastyr University in Kenmore, one of the leading natural-health medical schools in the country.



Notice Welliver didn't even mention prescription drugs. Maybe that seems conservative to her but others might see it, well, differently. There is formidable advocacy in American medical circles that more citizens need to be on blood pressure or hypertension drugs. It's estimated only about a third of adults with hypertension have it under control.

In fact, earlier this month researchers were buzzing about two new studies showing that older, cheaper and generic blood pressure medications featuring "water pills" or diuretics serve as an effective first defense against blood readings of 140 over 90 and up.

Dr. Kenneth Jamerson, a University of Michigan physician and co-author of one of the studies, characterized the research as supporting a more fiscally conservative approach to blood pressure reduction. His study combined two medications, the diuretic and an ACE inhibitor, benazepril, into one pill -- and fewer insurance co-pay charges.

"Our idea is, if you have to add on," said Jamerson, "why not do two right off the bat" (in a single daily pill)?

Interestingly, another study just released makes a case for the cholesterol-fighting class of medications called statins to be capable of serving double-duty by also reducing blood pressure.

For her part, Welliver says there is good evidence that taking a diuretic will cause your body to stay on the blood pressure drug for life because it actually limits water and fluids.

"The oldest medicines are really good food, good care, good water and good love," Welliver said. "Hydration is important to lowering your blood pressure. Drinking lots of water is beneficial. The research is interesting. It showed infants who tended to go through some level of dehydration as babies will have higher blood pressure during adult years."

Welliver is far from alone in urging patients to eat more healthfully as a blood pressure regulator. Diets high in fruits and vegetables, as outlined in high-profile studies at Harvard, are found to help decrease readings. While some scientists attribute it to eating fewer salty foods, Welliver said the key element is that fresh

produce offers a balance of calcium, potassium and magnesium to offset the sodium intake. There is research to show some individuals are more sensitive to a sodium trigger on blood pressure, a condition that runs in families.

"Some patients are happier to get some of their fruits and veggies in juices they can get at health food stores and juice stands around town," Welliver said. "I recommend celery, carrot and beet juices to start. Parsley is also great for reducing blood pressure."

The "good love" part of Welliver's program is more about treating yourself right by being more active. She said you don't have to go to the gym as much as walk regularly. For instance, commuters who make a point to walk several blocks each way are helping their blood pressure readings to reach healthy range.

"Getting a pedometer is constructive," she said. "If you can work up to 10,000 steps a day, it can make a huge difference in preventing hypertension."

A Brigham Young University study published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* in March puts a different twist on good love affecting your BP. Researcher Julianne Holt-Lunstad found that happily married adults have significantly lower blood pressure than single people, even if the singles have supportive social networks. Not surprisingly, unhappily married individuals had higher blood pressure outcomes, on average, than either happily marrieds or singles.

There is one situation in which Welliver relents to using prescription drugs, whether cheaper and generic or more expensive and cutting edge.

"I generally find patients don't have to go on medications unless they are smoking or drinking regularly," she said. "Once they get to a certain (borderline high) level, it's hard to lower the blood pressure if people have smoking or drinking habits."

Welliver said even a couple glasses of wine per day can keep your blood pressure above borderline. She knows from years of seeing just this occurrence in patients, especially when her practice was based in Napa Valley.

"One thing I tell patients is to drink a cup of herbal tea for relaxation first, then have a glass of wine if you still need it," Welliver said. "Even if you can cut back from every night to, say, a couple glasses of wine two nights of the week, you can knock down those readings," she said.

"Otherwise, you will keep hanging around 140 over 80 to 90 to 95 no matter what you do."

REDUCING BLOOD PRESSURE

Based on lifestyle behavior research and the insights of Nancy Welliver, a naturopathic physician and faculty member at Bastyr University in Kenmore, here are some changes you can make to reduce a borderline or high blood pressure reading:

- Drink plenty of water. Switch to herbal teas in the afternoon.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables to increase your potassium, magnesium and calcium intake. An underrated veggie for blood pressure: sweet potato.
- Cut down on your alcohol consumption. A couple of glasses of wine two nights a week is OK, a glass or two every evening can keep BP higher than healthy.
- Go to bed between 10 and 10:30 p.m. Welliver said studies show it is the optimal time to fall asleep and staying up later triggers a "second wind" and less healthy rest. "I tell my students people can't be healthy if they're not sleeping and pooping."
- Invest \$20 to \$60 in a pedometer to gauge how many steps you take per day. Your goal for lower blood pressure is 10,000 steps per day.

- Work on your marriage. Research shows unhappily married people are prone to higher BP than happily married folks or singles.
- See your chiropractor. A 2007 study at the University of Chicago showed specific adjustment of the C-1 or atlas vertebra in the neck "is associated with marked and sustained reduction in blood pressure similar to the use of two-drug combination therapy."
- Perform deep breathing techniques. Welliver said a sequence of deep-breathing work done in a physician's office often can lower BP by 10 to 20 points and sometimes is even enough of a reduction to allow the patient to go home rather than be admitted to a hospital.