7 steps women should follow to improve blood pressure control

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On average, a woman dies of a heart attack, stroke or another form of cardiovascular disease every minute in the United States. Many of these deaths are preventable. The challenge is that most women do not recognize that heart disease is the leading cause of death for their gender in the U.S. Additionally, there is a divergence in heart disease risk factors and symptoms between women and men, which complicates diagnosis.

One of the major risk factors for heart disease is hypertension, which is often called a “silent killer” because women may show no symptoms. Astonishingly, nearly half of women grappling with high blood pressure do not have it under control, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the good news is that early diagnosis and blood pressure management can markedly reduce the incidence of heart disease and mortality in women.

Here is a list from the AMA’s What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series—which provides physicians with a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today’s health care headlines—on some steps women can take to improve blood pressure control and reduce their risk for heart disease.

1 Measure your BP at home

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Many patients with high blood pressure don't have their hypertension under control. But when patients measure their BP regularly, and share those measurements with their doctors, they are playing an important role in their care. Here is what patients need to know about taking their own blood pressure measurements outside of the clinical setting.

The AMA is a self-measured blood pressure (SMBP) champion with the Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health. The program aims to create a network of public and private organizations focused on heart health with an emphasis on SMBP control.

2 Know what your BP reading means

Normal BP is under 120/80 mm Hg. Any numbers over that threshold are considered elevated or high. If a person has multiple elevated BP measurements at different points in time, they often have high blood pressure. Your physician can look at your numbers and determine if you have high blood pressure. A family physician offers guidance on what to know about blood pressure.

3 Take medications to reach BP goals

While making appropriate lifestyle change is key for reducing high blood pressure, patients may need medication to reach their BP goal. Talk to your physician about what medications are being prescribed and how they can help with lowering your BP. A family physician discusses what patients need to know about high blood pressure.

4 Eat healthful food when you can

What you eat plays a leading role in your health and well-being. When someone eats healthfully, it helps to protect against many chronic diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and obesity. But with so many fad diets

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and food recommendations out there, it can be hard for patients to navigate what to eat and what not to eat. Two physicians offer realistic, tested advice on healthy eating.

5 Increase physical activity

Staying active is one of the best ways to keep your body healthy. It can also improve your overall well-being and quality of life by relieving stress, anxiety, depression, and anger. Maintaining or increasing physical activity is also a key lifestyle change that can help reverse prediabetes and lower blood pressure. But knowing what type of activity to choose—whether it is moderate or vigorous physical activity—and how to start can be confusing. An obesity medicine physician shares what to keep in mind.

6 Practice healthy sleep habits

Women are more likely than men to have insomnia and other sleep problems. Changing hormones during a woman's menstrual cycle, pregnancy and menopause can also affect how well a woman sleeps. But there are steps you can take to improve your sleep hygiene and improve your mental and physical health.

7 Focus on being optimistic

Long-term stress can lead to serious health problems and contribute to high blood pressure. Stress can also affect women more than men, contributing to headaches and an upset stomach. Finding ways to manage stress such as remaining optimistic can help. A cardiologist shares more about heart disease prevention.

The AMA has developed online tools and resources created using the latest evidence-based information to support physicians and care teams to help manage their patients' high blood pressure.?These resources are available to all physicians and health systems

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as part of Target: BP™, a national initiative co-led by the AMA and American Heart Association.

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