

Alternative Treatments for Hypertension

A spectrum of complementary and alternative medicine approaches are believed to be effective for treating hypertension. The current evidence indicates that — in addition to a diet that is low in saturated fat and salt, and rich in complex carbohydrates (vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and fruits)— increased physical activity and regular practice of relaxation techniques should become integral components of a healthy lifestyle aimed at treating hypertension. As for many popular herbs and supplements that are touted to be effective and safe at lowering blood pressure, the evidence is weak.

Physical activity

It is difficult to find people with chronic conditions (such as coronary artery disease, diabetes, and obesity) who would not benefit from increased physical activity, including people who have hypertension. A solid body of evidence shows that men and women of all age groups who are physically active have a decreased risk of developing hypertension. Findings from multiple randomized clinical trials indicate that exercise lowers blood pressure as much as do some drugs. People with mild and moderately elevated blood pressure who exercise 30 to 60 minutes three to four days per week (walking, jogging, cycling, or a combination) might be able to significantly decrease their blood pressure. Progressive resistance exercise, in which you gradually increase the difficulty of the exercise, also appears to be effective.

Breathing and stress management

Physical activity not only has positive effects on physical health, but it is a great way to improve mood and manage psychological stress. It is known that blood pressure increases when a person is under emotional stress and tension, but there isn't enough evidence to conclude that psychological interventions aimed at stress reduction can decrease blood pressure in patients with hypertension.

Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that ancient relaxation methods that include controlled breathing and gentle physical activity — such as yoga, Qigong, and Tai Chi — are beneficial. People with mild hypertension who practiced these healing techniques daily for two to three months experienced significant decreases in their blood pressure, had lower levels of stress hormones, and were less anxious compared with subjects in control groups.

The results of a recent small study suggest that a daily practice of slow breathing (15 minutes a day for eight weeks) brought about a substantial reduction in blood pressure. These findings need to be confirmed in larger and better-designed studies before these ancient healing techniques are recommended as effective non-drug approaches to treating hypertension. The possible benefits, coupled with minimal risks, make these gentle practices an ideal first step to begin incorporating physical activity and relaxation techniques into a healthy lifestyle.

It is important that inactive older people or those with chronic health problems are evaluated by their doctors before starting a program of any physical activity, including Tai Chi, Qigong, or yoga classes.

Herbs with antihypertensive activities

The efficacy and safety of herbal therapies — such as *Rauwolfia serpentina* (snakeroot), *Stephania tetrandra* (tetrandrine), *Panax notoginseng* (ginseng), and *Crataegus* species (hawthorn) — for treating hypertension have not been extensively studied. Because of potential health risks associated with these herbs, it is imperative that you inform your doctor if you plan to use or are already using them. This is even more important if these herbs are used in combination with antihypertensive drugs. Some herbs — such as licorice, ephedra (Ma Huang) and yohimbine (from the bark of a West African tree) — should not be used by patients with hypertension because they can increase blood pressure.

Supplements

The ability of several supplements to reduce blood pressure is supported by the results of some placebo-controlled studies. Among them are coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10), omega-3 fatty acids, and two amino acids: L-arginine and L-taurine.

People with mild hypertension who were taking CoQ10 experienced a significant drop in their blood pressure without appreciable side effects compared with those taking inactive placebo. In addition, CoQ10 supplement appears to reduce blood pressure by a different mechanism than major antihypertensive drugs.

Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids, particularly EPA and DHA, were reported to reduce the blood pressure of patients with mild hypertension compared with placebo in small studies. However, no blood pressure-reducing activity by omega-3 fats was observed in other published studies of patients with hypertension. Current evidence suggests that modest reductions of blood pressure might occur with significantly higher doses of omega-3 fatty acids.

It has been suggested that the diet supplement L-arginine might lower blood pressure. L-arginine is an amino acid that is a precursor to nitric oxide, a gas that relaxes blood vessels and lowers blood pressure. The few studies conducted to date were small and not well-controlled, and suggest that L-arginine might lower blood pressure for only a short period of time. Another amino acid, L-taurine, might also have blood pressure-lowering qualities.

Talk to your doctor before starting any medicine, including these supplements, which might be available without a prescription. The risks and benefits of every medicine (including over-the-counter drugs) must be carefully weighed on an individual basis.

Acupuncture

Extensive research on the effectiveness of acupuncture for lowering blood pressure has been reported, but many studies have considerable weaknesses. More rigorously controlled research is needed to determine the value of acupuncture.