

Hypertension

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May is the month that we truly know spring has arrived. Flowers are in full bloom, our days are growing longer and we can trade our coats and jackets for short sleeves. But it is also a time when people are asked to look at a deadly killer---high blood pressure. May is National High Blood Pressure Education Month. This sometimes silent disease leads to strokes, heart attacks, congestive heart failure and kidney failure. And common knowledge would say it is a grown-up's disease.

Sadly, not only are our children's waist sizes growing but their blood pressures are steadily climbing as well. Even small increases in blood pressure during childhood predict big problems down the line. What we know for sure is long-term excess dietary sodium (salt) promotes excessive cell growth, leading to thickening of the blood vessel walls leading to stiff vessels.

As we welcomed a group of 159 campers to Camp Just Start last summer, we were alarmed to see that almost 100% of them had high blood pressure and almost 100% of the parents did not know it.

Hypertension is the result of either increased resistance to blood flow or increased blood volume or both. The heart must work harder to push more blood through the body’s circulatory system so it can deliver the needed oxygen to all the cells. And hypertension is also on the rise in children related to their sedentary lifestyle and learned food preferences. A cascade of occurrences is making their bodies malfunction. Weight gain is just the beginning.

Our first line of defense must be to tackle the underlying cause of this problem. There are many factors that contribute to this startling news.

The first is our sedentary lifestyle. Activity is so important to our children for so many reasons. Exercise increases nitric oxide in our blood which relaxes smooth muscle in the artery wall. This will dilate the blood vessels and will bring blood pressure down. To keep our children healthy we need to keep them physically active. At Camp Jump Start we suggest that for every hour of screen time---whether it be cell phone, laptop or television then they must be active for the same amount of time.

The second is poor food choices. We all know when we are eating things that we shouldn't. But maybe we don't realize that some of the foods we consider healthier choices are contributing to an unhealthy diet. Did you know that a cup of corn flakes or two slices of white bread has more sodium than 20 potato chips? Corn flakes and white bread do not taste salty but potato chips do. Sodium is hidden in the processed foods, so taste is not a reliable indicator of salt intake. We have to choose wisely.

And it is not just in the foods we choose at home. Over 80% of our sodium comes in processed foods or is added by the cooks in your favorite restaurant. Our body needs 300-500mg of sodium to live, but those eating out a lot may be getting as much as 6,000 mg or more. Recommendations on daily sodium intake have changed in recent years from various health agencies. Camp Jump Start proactively teaches children and families to decrease their sodium levels to around 1200 mg per day.

Remember: salt is salt. Any word combination that says "sodium" counts.

The goal for all of us, whether the parent or the child is to take charge of our health and make informed decisions.

- Read labels! Sodium in foods should be less than the calories in the food. If the sodium is 60 mg then the serving should not have more than 60 calories in it.
- Get rid of your salt shaker! Do not add any salt to your food. It will take at least 6- 12 weeks for your taste buds to lose the salt addiction!
- Cook and eat more meals at home—it can help your budget and your blood pressure.

Instead of treating symptoms, we must get to the cause of the problem to earn our health back.

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