NewYork-Presbyterian cardiologist breaks down the DASH diet, and other ways to lower blood pressure

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Nearly half of adults in the United States have high blood pressure, also known as hypertension, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. High blood pressure raises the risk for heart disease and stroke, the leading causes of death in the U.S. But did you know that there's a specific diet plan that can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of these conditions?

The DASH Eating Plan, short for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, is high in vegetables, fruits and whole grains, and includes fat-free or low-fat dairy products, fish, poultry, beans, nuts and vegetable oils. It limits food high in saturated fat and sugar-sweetened beverages and sweets.

"The DASH Diet is proven to help address hypertension," says Dr. Sean Mendez, a cardiologist at NewYork-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital.

Researchers first investigated the DASH diet in 1997 in a clinical trial published in New England Journal of Medicine that enrolled 459 adults with high blood pressure to assess the effects of dietary patterns on blood pressure.

"By that time, we had kind of known salt is the enemy of anybody with high blood pressure," says Dr. Mendez. "And so most diets and interventions focused on lowering salt. But these researchers said, "What if rather than counting salt or lack of salt, we focus on a diet high in fruits, vegetables and whole grains?"

For three weeks, all participants were fed a control diet low in fruit, vegetables and dairy products, with a fat content typical of the average diet in the U.S. They were then randomly assigned to two different diets: a control diet rich in fruits and vegetables, or a "combination" diet rich in fruits and vegetables with the addition of low-fat dairy products and with reduced saturated and total fat. While both diets reduced the participants' blood pressure, the "combination" diet – the DASH diet – reduced it significantly more.

In the ensuing decades, study after study has backed up the DASH diet's ability to lower blood pressure.

What makes the DASH Diet unique is its focus on nutrient-rich foods that naturally support healthy blood pressure. Fruits and vegetables tend to be high in potassium, an essential mineral needed by tissues in the body that helps maintain normal levels of fluid inside our cells, reduces the effects of sodium, and improves blood pressure.

Magnesium, a nutrient found in dark leafy greens, seeds, beans and nuts, and calcium, also plays a role in regulating blood pressure, as does calcium, a mineral often found in dairy products that is also responsible for building and maintaining strong bones.

It also helps that these foods are low in salt, which can cause the body to retain fluid and has long been known to raise blood pressure.

Though the DASH diet specifically benefits patients with high blood pressure who are looking to lower it, a lot of its principles can be good for everyone. "But especially once you have hypertension, it's time to make those changes for the long-term benefits," says Dr. Mendez. Even if you need to be on blood pressure medication, following the diet may reduce how much medication you need to take, he says.

In addition to the DASH diet, there is a lot you can do to keep your blood pressure under control, says Dr. Mendez, including losing weight, watching alcohol consumption, increasing physical activity and reducing salt intake. He also encourages patients to monitor their blood pressure between doctors' appointments.

It's also important to remember that sometimes blood pressure can be hereditary, and the DASH diet will help even if a patient also needs medication to manage it. "Some people feel that it's a failure on their part if they have to take medication," says Dr. Mendez. "But some things are hereditary and beyond our control. Maybe you can't get exactly to where you want to be, but you're still giving yourself a lot of benefit by trying the DASH diet and other lifestyle modifications."