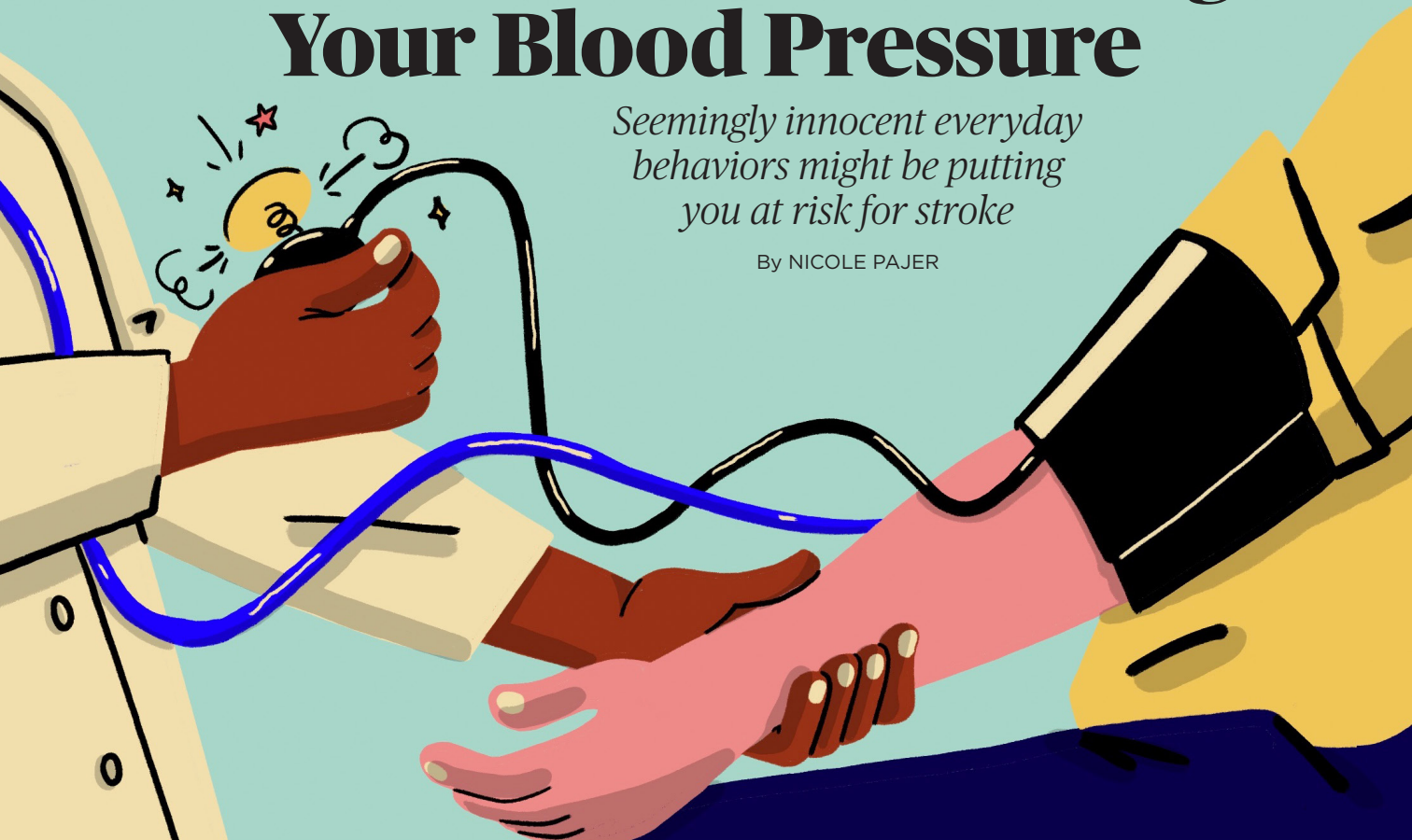


8 Habits That Are Raising Your Blood Pressure

Seemingly innocent everyday behaviors might be putting you at risk for stroke

By NICOLE PAJER



HYPERTENSION is commonly called the silent killer. It's a leading risk factor for stroke, heart attack and heart failure.

But while exercise, medication and going easy on the saltshaker are all important in keeping blood pressure down, you may be undoing all that good with a handful of personal habits that can put you at increased risk. Ask yourself if any of these factors sound like you.

PRESSURE POINT #1

You're an antisocial woman—or an overly social man

"As a species, we're not meant to be without other people," says Annalijn Conklin, an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia.

"If you are socially isolated, it raises your cortisol levels to put you in a fight-or-flight response." A study Conklin conducted of 28,238 adults ages 45 to 85 found that for women, being single, having limited social activity or being part of a small social network was linked to higher average blood pressure.

Interestingly, Conklin's study found that men who lived alone or had small social networks were less likely to have high blood pressure than those who lived with others or had large networks (greater than 220 people). It's unclear whether the difference was due to biological reasons or simply because there's less stigma around men going it alone.

That said, feeling isolated is

not good for your arteries. Another, smaller study of adults ages 50 to 68 found that those with the highest scores on a loneliness survey had a systolic blood pressure (the first number in a blood pressure reading) that was 10 to 30 points higher than that of their less lonely counterparts.

PRESSURE POINT #2

You hold it when you have to go

"A full bladder raises blood pressure about 10 to 15 points," explains Luke Laffin, M.D., codirector of the Center for Blood Pressure Disorders at the Cleveland Clinic. That's why he and his colleagues encourage people to urinate before they measure their blood pressure, particularly if they're doing this to monitor the



medications they're taking at home. "It's fine to hold it if you're in a situation where you cannot urinate freely, but if you can use the restroom, then you shouldn't necessarily delay," Laffin says. Do a preemptive pee before going to the theater or beginning a long car ride.

Speaking of urination, getting up frequently at night to relieve yourself may be a sign of hypertension. "If your blood pressure is elevated, that causes the body to say, 'I need to lower my blood pressure.' One way to do that is to urinate," Laffin notes.

PRESSURE POINT #3

You haven't had your thyroid checked in a while

Both overactive and underactive thyroids can raise blood pressure; a severely overactive thyroid can boost your risk of cardiovascular issues, says Nicole Ronda Bloom, M.D., an accredited endocrinologist based in New Hyde Park, New York.

Bloom encourages patients to get their levels checked annually, or every six months if they have a strong family history of thyroid disease or symptoms. And if you're on thyroid medication, make sure you're taking it as prescribed. "Skipping medicine for low thyroid doesn't often cause high blood pressure, but missing medicine for high thyroid can be problematic," Bloom adds.

PRESSURE POINT #4

You pass on the produce

Having too much sodium is a long-established catalyst for hypertension. But consuming a diet rich in produce can help counter these effects, thanks to the potassium found in many fruits and vegetables. Potassium decreases blood pressure by causing our bodies to release sodium, says Seamus Whelton, M.D., an assistant professor of medicine at the Johns Hopkins Medicine Division of Cardiology. Men should aim for 3,400 milligrams of potassium per

day, and women need about 2,600.

There's no need to take potassium supplements unless your doctor recommends this. Foods including bananas, dried fruit, potatoes and beans will help keep your salt-to-potassium ratio in check. "About 75 percent of the sodium most people consume is already in food when they buy it," Whelton says. Swapping out processed foods and eating four to five servings of fruits and four to five servings of vegetables per day is the key to reducing your sodium and upping your potassium.

PRESSURE POINT #5

You relax with a drink or two

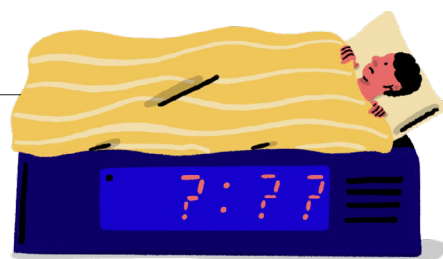
A study of more than 17,000 U.S. adults found that just seven to 13 drinks per week "substantially raises one's risk of high blood pressure." Moderate drinkers were 53 percent more likely to have stage 1 hypertension and twice as likely to have stage 2 hypertension than participants who didn't drink. That percentage got higher with the more drinks a person had.

Whelton warns that even drinking too much in one sitting can spike your blood pressure over the next few days. Stick to the rule of thumb of one to two drinks per day for men and one per day for women.

PRESSURE POINT #6

You take medication your cardiologist doesn't know about

In one study, 18.5 percent of adults with hypertension reported taking a medication that contributed to increased blood pressure. "There are several medications that can do it," notes Carey Kimmelsiel, M.D., director of the Interventional Cardiology Center at Tufts Medical Center and a professor of medicine at the Tufts University School of Medicine. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as naproxen (Aleve) and ibuprofen (Motrin), and decongestants, like Sudafed,



which contains pseudoephedrine, are known to increase high blood pressure. Some antidepressants and immunosuppressants can also be culprits. Always ask your cardiologist about new medications before taking them, Kimmelsiel says.

PRESSURE POINT #7

You have erratic bedtimes

"People who don't get six to eight hours of uninterrupted sleep can have elevated blood pressure," Laffin says. Several studies have found that sleepless nights raise blood pressure not only throughout the night but the next day as well.

For quality sleep, go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, avoid drinking and eating 90 minutes before bed, and don't watch television in bed. And if you're snoring, gasping for air in the night or exceptionally tired during the day, get checked for sleep apnea. Treating this "lowers blood pressure by three or four points in the average individual," Laffin adds.

PRESSURE POINT #8

You're toughing it out with chronic pain

Ongoing pain issues can cause chronically elevated blood pressure, according to Laffin. And taking NSAIDs for more than a week to try to manage your pain can raise your risk even more. If you have pain that lasts for more than a few weeks, see your physician, and don't delay needed operations such as knee or hip replacements. "Treat the underlying cause of the pain and then the blood pressure elevation goes away," Laffin says. ■

Nicole Pajer writes about health for The New York Times, Woman's Day and other publications.