Be aware of “white-coat hypertension”

You’re at your regular checkup and you tell your doctor you’re feeling fine—you’ve lost weight, are eating healthy and exercising five times a week. You check your blood pressure regularly with a home blood pressure monitor and your readings are always within the proper range. Things are looking good, right? The nurse comes in and measures your blood pressure—and tells you that the high reading indicates you might have high blood pressure, or hypertension. You can’t believe it. What gives?

You may be experiencing what’s called “white-coat hypertension,” or “white-coat syndrome.” Some people get nervous when they’re visiting the doctor (who often wears a white coat), which can lead to temporarily higher readings in their blood pressure. If you experience this, you’re not alone—studies show that 10 to 20 percent of patients may experience white-coat hypertension when they visit their doctors.

So as long as your blood pressure readings are fine when you get home you should have no problems, right? Most of the time, yes. But while a case of the jitters may cause your blood pressure to rise during a visit to the doctor, recent studies have shown that white-coat hypertension may indicate more than just nervousness. It may help identify those at a serious risk for hypertension. Two studies from 2005 and 2009 found that a higher percentage of people who experienced white-coat hypertension progressed to actual hypertension compared to those who didn’t experience it. This may be an indicator that people with white-coat hypertension are more susceptible to stress, which can lead to increased blood pressure over time.

More studies are needed, but talk to your doctor if you experience white-coat hypertension. You’ll most likely be asked to periodically monitor your blood pressure at home to see if it’s just being at the doctor’s office that’s raising your blood pressure. You may be given a 24-hour ambulatory blood pressure monitor, which will periodically measure and record your blood pressure throughout the day. If your doctor suggests using a home blood pressure monitor, bring it to your doctor to make sure it’s accurate and you know how to use it properly. If your home blood pressure readings start to rise, talk to your doctor about ways to reduce your blood pressure.
Life's Simple 7 in a Nutshell

Cardiovascular health encompasses two basic components: ideal health behaviors, and ideal health factors.

The behaviors include not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, meeting or exceeding AHA recommendations for physical activity and eating a healthy diet.

The health factors include blood pressure, fasting blood glucose and total cholesterol levels that are within the AHA’s recommended range—preferably without needing medication to keep them there.

Modest lifestyle or behavioral changes can move you in the right direction. And those who make behavioral changes before developing any serious health risks can look forward to a better quality of life and moving toward excellent heart health.
Why gaining weight pushes up cholesterol levels

It's obvious that eating foods high in fat causes us to gain weight, increasing the levels of fat in our bodies. But as we gain weight from eating fatty foods, our cholesterol levels go up as well. Why?

There are two kinds of cholesterol: LDL (low-density lipoprotein) and HDL (high-density lipoprotein). LDL is often called the “bad” cholesterol because it's made up mostly of fat and raises your risk of heart disease. LDL cholesterol is affected by diet, so certain foods that you eat can increase the levels of this dangerous cholesterol in your body.

Eating foods that are high in saturated fats, trans fats and dietary cholesterol can raise the levels of LDL cholesterol. Since these same foods are the ones that tend to make us gain weight, your LDL cholesterol levels rise along with the number on the scale. Knowing which foods contain these types of fats can help you avoid them and you'll not only lose weight but lower your cholesterol levels as well.

The AHA recommends limiting your saturated fat intake to less than 7 percent of your total daily calories and your trans fats to less than 1 percent of your total daily calories. Saturated fat is found mostly in foods from animals, such as beef, veal, lamb, pork, poultry fat, butter, cream, milk, cheeses and other dairy products. Trans fats are found in fried foods and lots of commercial baked goods that are found on grocery store shelves such as cookies, snack cakes and crackers. Look for the words “partially hydrogenated” in the ingredient list—that’s a dead giveaway that trans fats are in there.

So what do these percentages actually mean when you’re planning meals? To use an example, a sedentary woman between the ages of 31 and 50 needs 2,000 calories each day. This means that she should eat no more than 16 grams of saturated fat and less than 2 grams of trans fats per day.

You should also limit your dietary cholesterol intake to less than 300 mg per day. Cholesterol can be found in organ meats, egg yolks and whole milk products.

By watching your saturated fat, trans-fat and dietary cholesterol intake, you'll not only lose weight but lower your cholesterol levels as well, reducing your risk of heart disease.
How losing weight can lower your blood sugar

High levels of blood sugar can be dangerous and lead to type 2 diabetes, which can then increase your risk for heart disease. If your doctor has indicated that your blood sugar is a bit high, losing weight can help you get that number down and prevent you from developing diabetes.

Sugar in the blood comes from two sources—the carbohydrates that you eat and your liver. Carbohydrates are found in foods such as bread, cereal, potatoes, rice, sugar and candy. Eating too many carbohydrates can cause sugar to build up in your blood. Your liver creates extra sugar when your body can’t move enough sugar into your muscles. This happens if you develop insulin resistance, which is when the insulin in your body isn’t working properly. Body fat, especially around your waist, can add to insulin resistance. Losing weight can help you get your insulin back on track and stop your liver from producing extra sugar. If you’re overweight and your blood sugar is high, losing just 5 percent to 10 percent of your weight will improve blood sugar levels.

Losing just 10 or 15 pounds can get your blood sugar down to a healthy level.

If your doctor is concerned about your increasing blood sugar levels, work together to come up with a meal plan that limits the carbohydrates you eat and reduces calories. Increasing your physical activity can also help you get your blood sugar levels down. Exercise lowers insulin resistance and helps move sugar from the blood into your muscles.

Resources

Life’s Simple 7® Assessment
To understand the steps you may need to take to improve heart health and quality of life, visit heart.org/mylifecheck

Track your blood pressure at home
Use the AHA’s online blood pressure tracking tools at heart360.org

Quit smoking
Get tips on ways to break the habit at smokefree.gov

Get physically active
For ideas on how to incorporate physical activity into your life, visit startwalkingnow.org

Body Mass Index Calculator
heart.org/BMI