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The “DASH” Difference – Blood Pressure Control

The National Institutes of Health sponsored an eight-week study called “Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension” (DASH) with 459 adults (some with hypertension). Participants ate one of three carefully controlled diets.

- Diet 1.** Typical American diet low in fruits, vegetables, and dairy, and high in fat.
- Diet 2.** Large amounts (8 – 10 servings) of fruits and vegetables, but the diet was high in fat.
- Diet 3.** Diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and low-fat dairy and protein foods.

Both the second and third diets showed a reduction in blood pressure within two weeks, but diet three produced the best results. Study participants who already had hypertension showed the greatest decrease in blood pressure. This diet is now called the “DASH” diet and is based on 2000 calories a day. **Large amounts of vegetables and fruits and plenty of low-fat dairy products characterize the diet.** Sodium was controlled but not restricted during the study. The results showed that blood pressure was lowered even further when the “DASH” diet was combined with lowered sodium intake.

The “DASH” diet puts to work some current knowledge about blood pressure. Independent studies indicate that the mineral calcium is effective in reducing blood pressure and that calcium deprivation raises blood pressure. It has long been known that dietary potassium protects against hypertension. There is some evidence that magnesium is important in reducing hypertension. Fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and legumes provide potassium and magnesium. Low-fat milk and dairy products are major sources of calcium with a minimum of fat.

AN ADDED BENEFIT

A recent analysis of “DASH” diet participants shows that after 8 weeks on the diet, plasma homocysteine was lowered significantly. Homocysteine is now recognized as an independent risk factor for heart disease.

BEYOND DIET

The following steps are important in treating or preventing hypertension:

- Lose weight if you are overweight.
- Don’t smoke.
- Limit alcohol intake.
- Exercise at least 60 minutes daily.

A healthy overall diet without sodium restriction can be very effective in lowering blood pressure.

This effect is increased when sodium is reduced. A copy of the “DASH” food guide is available on the web at:

<http://www.nationaldairycouncil.org/NR/rdonlyres/332FE132-D2C3-434A-8CFD-85A83A8C020B/0/DMIDashbw.pdf>

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