

CMScript

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Member of a medical scheme? Know your guaranteed benefits!

Hypertension



Hypertension, commonly called high blood pressure, is a lifelong disease in which the pressure of blood against the walls of the blood vessels stays unacceptably high. It is a common condition, often with no warning signs. Over time, uncontrolled high blood pressure can quietly damage the heart, brain, kidneys and blood vessels. The only reliable way to know whether you have hypertension is to have your blood pressure measured correctly and regularly.

What is Hypertension?

Blood pressure is written as two numbers, for example, 120/80 mmHg. The first number is the systolic pressure, which is the pressure when the heart pumps blood. The second number is the diastolic pressure, which is the pres-

sure when the heart relaxes between beats. Hypertension is generally diagnosed when blood pressure readings are repeatedly 140/90 mmHg or higher, or when a healthcare professional confirms that treatment is needed. In South Africa, hypertension is usually managed at primary health-care level, with referral to higher levels of care when there are complications, very high readings, pregnancy-related hypertension, suspected secondary causes, or poor control despite treatment.

Signs and symptoms

Most people with hypertension feel well and have no symptoms. This is why hypertension is sometimes called a “silent killer”. When blood pressure is very high, some people may experience severe headache, blurred vision, dizziness, chest pain, shortness of breath and nosebleeds. Others may experience confusion, sudden weakness and numb-

ness on one side of the body or swelling of the legs. These symptoms need urgent medical attention, especially if they start suddenly or are severe.

When to seek urgent medical help?

Seek immediate medical attention if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Severe headache that does not improve.
- Chest pain or shortness of breath.
- Blurred vision or sudden loss of vision.
- Confusion or difficulty speaking.
- Sudden weakness or numbness, especially on one side of the body.
- Severe dizziness or loss of consciousness.
- A very high blood pressure reading, together with any of the above symptoms.

Causes and Risk Factors of Hypertension

Hypertension can develop as a result of a combination of lifestyle, environmental, genetic and medical factors. There are two main types of hypertension: primary (also called essential hypertension) and secondary hypertension.

Primary hypertension usually develops gradually over many years, and there is no identifiable cause of the hypertension.

Secondary hypertension usually appears more suddenly and may be caused by underlying medical conditions or certain medicines such as:

- Adrenal gland tumours.
- Kidney disease.
- Thyroid problems.
- Obstructive sleep apnoea.
- Congenital heart defects (heart and blood vessel problems that are present from birth).
- Certain medications, including some cough and cold medicines, some pain relievers, and contraceptives.
- Illegal drugs like cocaine and amphetamines.

Risk factors for hypertension also include:

- Increasing age.
- Family history of hypertension.
- Being overweight.
- An unhealthy diet, especially one that is high in salt and low in fruit and vegetables.
- Physical inactivity.
- Smoking or using tobacco and drinking alcohol excessively.
- High levels of stress.

- Chronic conditions such as diabetes, high cholesterol and some medicines.

Regular screening is especially important because many people do not know they have high blood pressure until complications occur.

Complications of Hypertension

If hypertension is not controlled, it can damage many organs. Possible complications include:

- Stroke.
- Heart attack or heart failure.
- Kidney disease or kidney failure.
- Damage to the eyes.
- Poor blood circulation.
- Sexual dysfunction.
- Memory problems.
- Pregnancy complications such as pre-eclampsia.

Treating hypertension and keeping blood pressure controlled greatly lowers the risk of these complications.

Prevention of Hypertension

Many cases of hypertension can be prevented or delayed through healthy daily habits. Helpful steps include:

- Checking blood pressure regularly.
- Maintaining a healthy diet by reducing salt intake, choosing fresh foods instead of processed foods, and eating more fruit and vegetables.
- Being physically active on most days of the week.
- Maintaining a healthy weight.
- Avoiding the use of tobacco and limiting alcohol intake.
- Taking prescribed medicines correctly.
- Attending regular check-ups and follow-up visits.

People who already have hypertension should not stop treatment when they feel better, because blood pressure can rise again without symptoms.

Diagnosis of Hypertension

Hypertension is diagnosed by measuring blood pressure using a validated blood pressure monitor. High readings usually need to be confirmed on more than one occasion, unless the blood pressure is dangerously high or the person has symptoms of a hypertensive emergency.

A healthcare worker may also check weight, waist circumference, urine, blood sugar, cholesterol, kidney function and heart risk. Some people may need an electrocardio-

gram (ECG), eye examination, or further tests if another condition is suspected. Home or clinic follow-up readings can help confirm the diagnosis and monitor control.

Treatment and Management of Hypertension

Treatment includes lifestyle changes and, when needed, long-term medication. Lifestyle measures remain important even when tablets are prescribed. Several types of medicines are available to treat hypertension. A healthcare provider will consider the person's age, other conditions, side effects, pregnancy status and treatment response when choosing treatment. Good control usually requires regular follow-up, taking medicine every day, reporting side effects, and checking for other cardiovascular risks such as diabetes, high cholesterol and smoking.

What is covered under PMB level of care?

Hypertension is one of the conditions in the Chronic Disease List, and it is also included under the Diagnosis and Treatment code 901E in the Prescribed Minimum Benefits (PMBs). This means that medical schemes must fund the diagnosis, treatment, and ongoing care of hypertension in accordance with the PMB rules, clinical criteria, treatment algorithms, formularies, and designated service provider (DSP) arrangements that apply to the member's scheme.

PMB cover may include:

- Doctor consultations.
- Blood pressure monitoring.
- Relevant investigations and chronic medication needed to manage uncomplicated hypertension.

Members should register the condition with their medical scheme, use the scheme's DSP where required, and ask their treating healthcare provider to use the correct ICD-10 code and clinical information.

References

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