

# Aging of the Heart and the Silent Killer Disease (Episode 03)

## *The Nutrition & Lifestyle Review with Dr. Kristen Halland [podcast]*

### Aging of the Heart

Hi everyone, I hope you're doing well today. Welcome to the episode. Today, I'd like to talk about a very important topic, aging.

Now, I'm not suggesting any of my youthful listeners need to worry about aging, this is just a preventative conversation for everyone. But actually, you know, my interest really got piqued in aging as a potential episode to share with you guys because I saw this great article in Time magazine. This was actually in 2015 but it stuck with me since. It said, "did you know that the average person's heart is eight years older than their actual age?" And the article was about new science showing us that our biologic age which is how much we're aging physically, is not the same as chronological age - that's the number of years we've been alive, the number of birthdays we've had. And then I started wondering about different references when people say they feel old or we make jokes about the female uterus and its timeline, like your clock is ticking. But have you ever wondered about ticking clocks on other organs, how are they aging and at what speeds? Well, we know that after age 18, the collagen and elastane in our skin is decreasing by one percent each year. In our 20's the aerobic capacity of the heart can drop ten percent per decade. After age 35, we're losing one percent of our bone mass every year. After age 40, eyesight begins to decline and after age 50, the villi in our intestines that help us absorb our vitamins and minerals start to flatten out naturally.

Sorry to be so bleak here but don't worry I'm going to share some really great tips for slowing the aging process. You're noticing that changing is beginning in some organs of the body much earlier than we think, so the time to address aging is actually now. Aging is for young people to worry about. Your average American is receiving their first disease diagnosis in their 40's but we're spending seventy percent of our health care costs as a country on people age 70 and older. So, what is happening there between age 40 and 70? Are we putting our health on the backburner for later while the aging process continues to accelerate quietly below the surface? Are we just not worried about it because we can get by right now? Or do we just think that certain health problems are for old people? Or perhaps our health care system isn't well designed to help us identify issues early enough. I'm not sure, it's probably a combination of those factors and others. But at the end of the day, we all want to live longer but we don't want to age.

So, I'm going to tell you what you can do today to promote healthy aging.

- One of the biggest factors in healthy aging is slowing inflammation. Inflammation has so many negative effects to the body; it causes insulin resistance, cardiovascular disease - that's the number one killer of Americans by the way, obesity, memory loss, arthritis and so many other things. Basically, nothing good comes from having inflammation in the body. Eating the wrong foods is what causes that destructive inflammatory process that ages us slowly like an ominous ticking clock. And then the inflammation caused by the wrong food choices creates the number one reason we die in America which is cardiovascular disease. So, the first thing we need to do is we need to eat right to lower inflammation and slow aging.
- The second biggest factor to prevent premature aging is to protect against the depletion of our vitamins and minerals. Depletion will occur naturally as we age. For example, by age 65 we've lost half of our muscle mass, so it's very important to cater nutritional strategies to our aging goals and to adapt them at certain

ages in our life. But in 2017 it's harder than ever to get good nutrients from food. Our food sources have become toxic with pesticides, we have hormones found in our animal products, GMO's, we've got companies marketing poor food choices to us and unfortunately, a side effect of modern life is that it's becoming more and more difficult to get what we need from a natural food source. One of my favorite examples of this is about 50 years ago, in one serving of broccoli you would find 450 milligrams of magnesium. Today, one serving of broccoli has 50 milligrams of magnesium. So, food is powerful for sure but sometimes it's not always that simple, sometimes we need additional nutrients to allow ourselves to heal and repair and to age slowly.

It's easier to prevent disease and premature aging than it is to reverse the hands of time later. We need to think right, eat right, we've got to move and sleep right. And two of the most powerful things that you can do to slow the aging process are to eat anti-inflammatory foods and avoid those ones that we know cause inflammation. And to make sure that you adjust your nutrient status to the period of life that you're in and get more good stuff because basically, if you want to be healthy, you've got to have more good guys in your body than bad guys.

The time to think about healthy aging *is right now*.

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Our next segment is on a disease called "the silent killer." Spoiler alert: it's hypertension, or high blood pressure! And it sounds ominous because it is.

High blood pressure happens when your arteries can't dilate properly to accommodate the constant, changing blood flow in your body.

It typically takes years to develop and it's called the silent killer because most people don't have symptoms. Their body is constantly adapting to it and it feels like the new normal. It's very, very sneaky. Usually people don't know it's a problem until a medical checkup.

There's really two controversies here regarding blood pressure that I am hearing from patients that I'd like to talk through:

First, blood pressure is taken at every medical visit. It's actually one of the first things done. When taking vital signs, it's a great opportunity to educate a patient on why they're important! And that's what I'm doing in this brief segment, so please keep listening. But to the patients, it seems ... perfunctory. Routine. Even annoying. Or frustrating because many people have what's called "white coat syndrome" where they have to justify their blood pressure reading because of a common spike or rise in blood pressure because of being nervous at the doctor's visit.

The second controversy, is over a new lowered optimal reading from 120/80 or even 110/70. Blood pressure fluctuates all the time, hour-by-hour, and day-by-day, and unfortunately this has created an opportunity for

over-diagnosis and unnecessary treatment. In 2015, the studies were showing that we needed to relax our blood pressure guidelines and allow it a bit higher for people over the age of 60. But then a new study called Sprint, from 2017, ended early with conclusions suggesting that if your top number is below 120 then it reduces the risk of heart attack and stroke by 1/3. and the risk of death by 1/4.

Studies are always so controversial, it feels like for every study that says one thing, you can find an equal and opposing study. Let me pause here and cover the basics of blood pressure real quick:

- the only way to know is to measure by a blood pressure reader which can be done with an arm or wrist cuff.
- It's measured as two numbers. The top is systolic blood pressure, which is how hard your heart is working while beating, and bottom is your diastolic blood pressure which is how hard heart is working at rest.
- The results are categorized. A reading of 120/80 is called normal blood pressure. A reading from 120-139 on your top number over 80-89 on your bottom number is classified as Prehypertension, or early stage high blood pressure. The levels continue to rise with stages called Hypertension Stage 1 and Hypertension Stage 2 where patients are going to be prescribed a combination of blood pressure medications along with lifestyle changes. A hypertensive crisis is when the blood pressure is 180/110 or higher, and this requires immediate, emergency medical attention.

Now back to our program.

Having chronically elevated BP is problematic because it leads to heart disease and stroke. IN FACT, these two conditions are the #1 and #2 top killers of Americans today. 1 in 2 women are dying from heart disease right now, so it really makes sense to understand your blood pressure.

When treatments are studied, there's something called the number needed to treat, or NNT. Let me give you an example related to heart disease. When people have high cholesterol, they may be prescribed a type of drug called a statin. The accepted NNT for statins is 1 in 83 - that means, for every 83 people treated with a statin drug, only 1 person has a heart attack prevented. 1 in 10 people on statins will develop a common side effect of muscle pain and 1 in 100 will develop diabetes because of the medication. To summarize, that NNT for statins means that 83 people are put at risk for negative side effects to save someone 1 time. By the way, these statistics are coming from sources like Dr. Mark Hyman, Dr. Christine Northrup, and TheNNT.com

Now I'm not suggesting we don't need medications or that they're evil. But I AM saying that properly prescribed, again PROPERLY prescribed medications are the fourth most common killer of Americans. I always prefer natural and safe approaches first.

Which brings me to my next point - to understand how to improve blood pressure naturally, we need to know what the CAUSES are.

Many factors are believed to contribute to hypertension. Here are some examples:

- at the top of my list is lifestyle factors: smoking, lack of exercise, stress, and illicit drug use
- next, diet. Diets too high in saturated fat, salt, alcohol or caffeine can cause high blood pressure. Also magnesium deficiency has been tied to hypertension
- It's possible that family history, age, or gender may play a role
- having co-morbid or underlying diseases such as obesity, diabetes, or kidney disease will make you more prone to high blood pressure
- Medications (antidepressants and NSAIDs) can cause high blood pressure
- other less likely scenarios could include things like a head injury, or lead poisoning (AHA, 2016)

At the end of the day, many of these causes of hypertension are temporary and curable. So, if we want to correct the cause of the problem, here's what we possibly can do to lower blood pressure naturally:

- Address our stress through any compatible outlet - that could be meditation, therapy, guided imagery, I really don't care as long as you're helping your body process stress better. Because let's be real, it's never going to magically go away!
- Exercise. If you're just starting out trying to be more active, research showed that just 30 mins of walking , five days a week was ENOUGH to slow the aging process. Start where ever you can. Just start! (Halland, 2017)
- Follow an insulin-normalizing diet with other critical factors. You can expect substantial improvements in your lipid profile, your blood sugar, and your blood pressure in just a few weeks time through diet because it's very powerful. I'd recommend finding an integrative RD or functional medicine physician in your area to help you. along with that, weight loss if needed will substantially impact blood pressure positively! (Northrup, 2017)
- And finally, sleep is the body's most effective way of digesting excess stress hormones. If you don't get enough sleep, your stress hormones stay elevated and this increases inflammation throughout your body. This causes your arteries to narrow and even constrict, which results in higher blood pressure.

Anti-hypertensive medicines are effective for reducing the risk of cardiovascular problems, but possibly to varying degrees. Now if you already are taking an anti-hypertensive medication - watch for side effects, and ask your pharmacist to confirm that there's no interactions with any other supplements or medications you may be taking. Hypertension is a big health risk, and you may need to use blood pressure-lowering medication for a time. Also, be sure to get your lipid profile and blood pressure checked again every three to six months.

In fact, for all of us, I'm going to go ahead and make a bold recommendation. I'm going to propose that we measure our BP and chart it every quarter. That means, you take your BP at home, twice a day around the same time, for 1-2 weeks and create a chart. You'll use that to identify any issues that may arise EARLY, and to take to

your visits with your doctor. One moment in time doesn't always reflect your true blood pressure, so it helps your physician to see a real pattern!

With the risk of death from heart disease and stroke doubling with every 20 point increase in systolic BP (your top #) or 10 mm Hg diastolic increase among people from age 40 to 89 (AHA 2016).

Earlier I mentioned salt intake as one of the most common dietary topics related to blood pressure and I think most listeners have heard of that link. A resource I'd recommend to read more about the consumption and type of salt's effects on BP is by visiting a website called *world healthiest foods* at [www.WHFoods.org](http://www.WHFoods.org) and read the article title "what is your approach to salt?"

I'd encourage you to continue researching and addressing hypertension at it's core cause.

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#### Resource List:

American Heart Association (2016 October). Understanding blood pressure readings. Retrieved from [http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/KnowYourNumbers/Understanding-Blood-Pressure-Readings\\_UCM\\_301764\\_Article.jsp#.WanFM8iGO6o](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/HighBloodPressure/KnowYourNumbers/Understanding-Blood-Pressure-Readings_UCM_301764_Article.jsp#.WanFM8iGO6o)

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Pelton, R (2017). Cardiovascular disease [Webinar]. Certified Clinical Nutritionist program via the Certified Clinical Nutrition Board, Session 2, Unit 7.

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