

Treating **HYPERTENSION** Integratively

Elizabeth Vaughan, MD

Mary looked down sadly as her doctor said, “You have to go on medicine for your hypertension. Your blood pressure is 155/105 today. You have a family history of hypertension; it’s in your genes. You’re 58 years old and postmenopausal. This happens when people get older.”

Mary knew he was right, and she just hated admitting it. She hoped that she could treat her high blood pressure naturally, but her life had been so crazy recently. Her mother died from a stroke six months ago and she struggled to make the lifestyle changes that she wanted. Finally, she looked up and said, “OK. I’ll take a pill.”

Her doctor smiled and gently patted Mary on the back, “My nurse will be with you shortly and we’ll start you on some samples. Come back in a month and we’ll recheck you. I really think you made the right choice.”

One day later Mary called my office to make an appointment.

One Month Later

Yavonda triaged Mary when she arrived at the office. Height 5’6”. Percent body fat 42, most of it in her trunk. Blood Pressure 160/110. Pulse 84. Weight 185 pounds. Waist 42. Mineral testing showed deficiencies in Zinc, Selenium, Manganese, Molybdenum, and Chromium. She especially liked the taste of the Chromium, “It tastes like grape Kool-aid.”

“That means you are really low on Chromium which can cause problems with your blood sugar,” Yavonda said.

“Well I know I’m pre-diabetic and my cholesterol is too high. Maybe taking some Chromium will help,” said Mary.

I met Mary in my private office. She appeared tired, overweight, and sad. “How can I help you?”

“I want to get off my blood pressure pill and treat it naturally. Can you help me do that?” asked Mary.



The causes of hypertension can also affect blood sugar, cholesterol, blood clotting mechanisms, adrenal glands, and kidneys.

So it’s more than just getting the right number when we check your blood pressure.

It involves addressing all the factors that are out of balance.

Hypertension accelerates the rate that your body is aging. Uncontrolled high blood pressure damages your arteries, heart, brain, and kidneys.

"It all depends on you, Mary. Hypertension accelerates the rate that your body is aging. Uncontrolled high blood pressure damages your arteries, heart, brain, and kidneys. This increases the chance that you'll need to stay on medication the rest of your life. If you want to come off of your medication, you're going to have to make some major lifestyle changes. It's more than just taking this supplement instead of that pill. What causes hypertension can also affect your blood sugar, cholesterol, blood clotting mechanisms, adrenal glands, and kidneys. So it's more than just getting the right number when we check your blood pressure. It involves addressing all the factors that are out of balance. I can help you get your blood pressure down with a drug, but that's not going to fix the underlying cause of why you have hypertension. Why do you think you have high blood pressure?" I asked.

"It's in my genes. My Mom and Dad had it. So I guess I'm stuck with it. I'm overweight, I don't exercise and I don't eat right. I guess all that plays into it," said Mary, looking down at her toes.

"How long have you had hypertension?" I asked.

"That's the funny thing," said Mary. "I haven't been eating right or exercising right for a long time, but I didn't get high blood pressure until after my Mom died of a stroke last year," she teared up.

"That must have been tough," I said. "Did you know it was coming?"

"No. She just woke up one day and couldn't move one side of her body, and then she had complications in the hospital and never came home. She couldn't talk to me after she woke up that day," Mary bit her lip and looked away.

I gave Mary a Kleenex to dry her tears and I teared up myself. "I lost my Dad real quickly too. He died of cancer six days after the diagnosis. It's awfully hard when you don't have much time to say goodbye."

"Yeah," said Mary still looking down and away.

"You might want to write her a letter and tell her everything that you would have said to her," I suggested.

"She's dead," Mary looked confused.

"I know, but sometimes when you pour your heart out on paper in a letter, it will release some of the stored up sadness, anger or loneliness that's still in your heart that can contribute to stress and hypertension," I smiled.

"I don't know. I've sure been stressed out more lately, but I didn't know it could cause high blood pressure," Mary said.

"Well, an isolated stress like the death of a parent might not cause hypertension in someone who was eating healthily, exercising, and sleeping well. But in somebody who is already stressed out as you describe yourself, one more stress can tip you over the edge. It's the straw that breaks the camel's back. Then you have to make some major changes or use a lot of medications," I explained.

"Well, I want to get well without any more drugs if I can," said Mary looking me right in the eye.

"Let's do your physical exam and figure out what we need to do," I smiled.

Physical Exam

I rechecked her blood pressure in the room and it was actually higher than when she arrived. 165/110. Pulse down to 72. Hands: sweaty and cool. Body shape: apple. Face: round and flushed. She had relatively slender arms and legs. Eye exam: significant narrowing of arteries and cholesterol plaquing. Lungs: clear. Heart: normal except for a prominent S4, an extra sound that meant her heart was struggling to beat against the high blood pressure and that it was getting older. Legs: swollen with fluid.

I rolled up the blood pressure cuff and put it in her hand and pumped it up to my diastolic blood pressure. "Mary, 60 is my diastolic or second BP number. Squeeze this until it reaches 90 systolic, my first blood pressure number," I told her.

"That's easy," she said as she squeezed it 5-6 times.

"Now, let's increase the pressure to 110, which is your second number. Squeeze it up to 165," I instructed.

Mary did this one or two times,

rolled her eyes, and said, "My gosh! That's a lot harder!"

"Mary, that's the pressure your heart is beating against day in and day out. That's why people with hypertension get weakened hearts and develop congestive heart failure. The higher numbers also damage your arteries," I explained.

"Well my blood pressure is up today because I'm nervous," said Mary.

"I'm sure you are. Most doctors call it 'white coat hypertension'. Have you been told you have that?" I asked.

"Yes. Many times over the years," said Mary.

"Well, I look at it differently. If your blood pressure goes up here, what happens to it when you get stressed out driving or when you have an argument with your husband? I think you're someone who channels your stress into your blood pressure," I suggested.

"I never thought about it that way," said Mary. "I do get headaches and dizzy when I'm angry sometimes. My husband always says he knows when I'm mad because I get really red in my face. Then THAT makes me really angry," said Mary.

Treatment Plan

"Mary, we are going to get lab work and I'm going to give you some information on how to start eating healthier and walking each day. These are the two most important things you can do for your health and your blood pressure. I also want you to try using this Heart-Math biofeedback unit. It may help you relax. Since your blood pressure started going up after your Mom's death and your blood pressure goes up when you get stressed out, I bet you can train your heart and nervous system to stay calm, even when you are faced with a stressful situation. Would you like to try it?" I asked.

"Sure, can I stop my blood pressure pill?" asked Mary.

"No. We'll use some supplements that will enhance the effectiveness of your pill. Your doctor put you on a good drug. It's an ARB (angiotensin receptor blocker). It actually slows down the

aging process. It has very few side effects and it works by blocking the most powerful hormone, angiotensin, which causes hypertension. It also increases the amount of nitric oxide, a molecule that reduces inflammation, works like an anti-oxidant, reduces blood pressure and slows down hardening of the arteries.

"I'm going to get a chemistry profile, thyroid functions, 24-hour urine cortisol, Vitamin D level, hemoglobin A1C, homocysteine, and CRP. All of these measure other risk factors for cardiovascular disease. They may give us clues as to what else may be causing your hypertension or other illnesses that are aggravated by hypertension," I explained.

Yavonda returned to Mary's room and drew blood on her and talked with her about going on a low-salt diet, 30% protein, 30% healthy fats including four tablespoons of olive oil a day, and 40% complex carbohydrates. This translated into lots of above the ground, healthy vegetables, lean meats and fish, healthy fats and a breakfast shake every morning made with hydrolyzed whey powder. She explained that each of the dietary components had been shown to bring down blood pressure.

"This may take four to six months," I cautioned. "It takes longer when you are treating the cause of high blood pressure as opposed to giving you a higher dose of a blood pressure pill. Also, each of the supplements has been shown to further reduce high blood pressure, by treating either the cause of the hypertension or the damaging effects of it," I explained.

I started her on a good multiple vitamin with lots of B6, Alpha Lipoic Acid, N-acetyl cysteine (NAC), mixed Vitamin

E, Vitamin C, fish oil and minerals. Also, I put her on Magnesium Taurate, Calcium Citrate and Arginine.

Biofeedback

"Here is the HeartMath unit. I tried it at a conference when I had to take a test at the end of a long week of classes. You'd think that having taken as many tests as I've taken in my almost 30 years of being a doctor that I would breeze through it. Wrong. By Friday night, I was feeling very nervous. I had planned on studying all night before the exam on Saturday morning. I don't know what lead me to the HeartMath display, but I think the Universe wanted me to finally learn that if I just calmed down, I would do OK. I worked with it and was surprised at how much calmer I felt. I still planned to study all night, but by the time I'd eaten dinner, I decided to get a good night's sleep, eat a healthy breakfast, and take the exam.

"Now I know I didn't score 100%, but I just got my letter that said that I passed the exam.

"I've been using the HeartMath unit ever since then. I honestly feel better if I relax for ten minutes several times a day using it. It's like hitting the reset button on my nervous system. All of a sudden, I feel more relaxed, which allows me to deal with whatever is stressing me out. Give it a try," I offered.

She used the HeartMath unit for a few minutes while I went back to finish her chart. When I returned, I smiled, "The light is green on the HeartMath unit. That means your heart calm. How do you feel?"

"I do feel calmer," Mary replied.

"I want you to use it three times a

day for ten minutes each, for the next two weeks. We'll be talking in two weeks.

"Lastly, I want you to buy a blood pressure monitoring device and measure your blood pressure several times a day. Minimally, Mary, your blood pressure should be no higher than 130/80. In the best of all worlds, it should be 110/70. I want you to get a feel for what your pressure is at various times a day. I also want you to check it after practicing HeartMath. I think you'll see a difference," I suggested. "This is the beginning of you learning how to take care of yourself."

Two Weeks Later

I called Mary for her telephone consult and reviewed the results of her labs with her. Her kidneys and thyroid were fine, but she was a borderline diabetic, she had too much cortisol in her urine suggesting that she was under a significant amount of stress; fortunately it wasn't high enough to support a diagnosis of Cushing's syndrome. Her homocysteine and C-reactive protein were both elevated, and her 25-Hydroxy Vitamin D was low.

"Mary, these labs show that you have several factors that contribute to why you have hypertension. The treatment that you're on, right now, should help correct all of these different problems. How are you doing with the diet and exercise?" I asked.

"Well, it's been a hard two weeks. I've probably walked four times and I started to make some changes with my diet," said Mary.

"Great! You're off to a good start. Take it a step at a time" I said. "How's your blood pressure doing?"

"It's down a little bit, but it's still too high. If you want it less than 130/80 I've got a long way to go," she said.

We reviewed her numbers and her blood pressure was averaging 155/100.

"Now we have a baseline for where you are on an average day. We'll be able to see how it changes as the supplements begin to take effect and you make changes in your diet and continue to exercise. Have you done the HeartMath?" I asked.

"I've done it a few times, but again, it's been a hard two weeks." Mary said.

"Mary, hypertension is not going to fix itself. Supplements are supplementary to changes in your lifestyle, which



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means you have to change your ways. You have to eat healthier, move your body more, and manage your stress better. You told me that you believed you got hypertension because of your genes. That's partly right, but your genes are not your destiny. If you have an unhealthy lifestyle, those bad genes will be turned on and you will get hypertension just like your Mom and Dad. If, on the other hand, you begin to live a healthier lifestyle, you will silence those genes. They won't be activated. Even though they are there, it won't make any difference. The choice is yours."

"Well I thought if my family had it, I got it and couldn't do anything about it," Mary questioned.

"That's not true, Mary. We know a lot more now than we did years ago. Your lifestyle controls what genes get turned on and turned off to a very large degree. So, do your best and I'll see you in four weeks. I'm proud of the first steps you've taken," I encouraged her.

Four Weeks Later

Mary returned to the office and she had lost twelve pounds. Her blood pressures at home continued to be about 150/95.

"I really like those shakes each morning," said Mary. "They're kind of boring, but they fill me up, and I put my fish oil into them. That stuff is nasty when you drink it straight out of the bottle!"

"Sorry it tastes nasty, but I'm glad you figured out a way to get it down. It reduces the inflammation in your body," I said. "How have you done with the HeartMath?"

"I'm doing better with that. I'm doing it twice a day and I'm sleeping better. I didn't complain about that, but I haven't slept well in years. If I use it before bed, it helps." Mary smiled.

"Mary, that's great! Getting enough sleep helps reduce stress, weight, and again, helps you stay calmer all the time."

"I want to adjust your supplements since your blood pressure is still as high as it is, and encourage you to go ahead and continue walking on a more consistent basis. How often are you walking?" I asked.

"I'm not doing the walking. I just have a hard time getting around to it," said Mary.

"Mary, to bring your blood pressure down and keep losing weight, exercise every day when you can," I said.

"You're asking a lot," said Mary. "That's really hard for me to do."

"Well Mary, do the best you can. Improving your lifestyle will reduce the number of supplements and medications that you'll need to use long term to control your blood pressure. You've already made a good start. Let's recheck in three months and add Holy Basil and Phosphatidyl serine to reduce the effect of your high cortisol and lower your blood pressure further. And I want you to increase your Arginine to two pills twice a day."

Three Months Later

Mary returned to the office after having blood work drawn several days ahead of time.

"Congratulations! Most of your numbers look better. Your hemoglobin A1C is lower, which means you're blood sugar is under better control, your homocysteine is lower which will reduce your risk of cancer and heart disease, your CRP is lower, which means you have less inflammation in your body, your Vitamin D has gone up, which means you're absorbing your Vitamin D which may also help bring down your blood pressure, and your urine cortisol is down. So I can tell the HeartMath and supplements are working," I smiled.

"I feel so much better," Mary said. "I actually feel younger. I didn't realize I could feel this good. I'd just gotten used to feeling old. I have more energy, my head is clearer, and I'm sleeping better than I was before. Even my husband notices a difference."

"I'm so proud of you, Mary. How are you doing with the diet and exercise? You've got to be doing better or your numbers wouldn't be as dramatically better as they are," I smiled.

"Well I walk about five days a week now. I screw up every now and then on the diet, but I stick with it pretty closely. I'm down to a size 12 dress. I haven't been here in a long time. I used to be in a 16," said Mary.

"I am so happy for you! Keep up the good work, keep using the HeartMath, and I'll see you in another three months," I said.

Six Months Later

Mary returned to the office and her blood pressure continued to come down. At home it averaged 130/80. She was down to a size 10 dress.

"Last week was the anniversary of my Mom's death. It was tough, but I wrote that letter we talked about the first time I met you. That plus the HeartMath made a huge difference. Thanks Dr. Vaughan," Mary smiled.

"I think you've done a terrific job. Let's just monitor you for another six months, let everything stabilize, then we can consider stopping the pill and/or cutting back on the supplements," I suggested. "It will take another year or so for your body to fully recover from your blood pressure being so high for so long. Your body will continue to get healthier. Congratulations on learning how to take care of yourself, Mary."

Submitted by Elizabeth Vaughan, MD of Vaughan Integrative Medicine, 1301 W. Wendover Ave., Greensboro. For more information, call 336-808-3627 or visit www.VaughanIntegrative.com

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