

## **“Knowing Your Numbers” May Save Your Life**

### **Christine Traxler MD, Alii Health Center, Primary Care**

*Malea, age 42, got more than medical treatment for her seafood allergy in 2023 when she visited the Kona Community Hospital emergency department after having an allergic reaction. Not only did she discover she was allergic to shrimp, but she was told that she suffered from hypertension (high blood pressure). Her blood pressure was a shocking 210/120 and didn't normalize after the crisis was past.*

### **What is Blood Pressure?**

A blood pressure cuff measures the pressure inside your arteries when the heart pumps blood throughout the body.

When blood pressure is measured with a simple blood pressure cuff, the two values are written as the systolic pressure over the diastolic. For example, if you see a blood pressure value of around 125/85, the systolic pressure is 125 mmHg and the diastolic pressure is 85 mmHg.

### **What is Healthy Blood Pressure?**

The [American College of Cardiology](#) established values for normal blood pressure in 2017 as follows:

*An ideal blood pressure is anything less than 120/80.*

*Hypertension (high blood pressure) involves consistent values of more than 130/80.*

### **Symptoms of High Blood Pressure**

*Malea's trips to see her PCP in the coming weeks after the diagnosis were an education for her. She learned that most people have no symptoms of hypertension at the time of their diagnosis. Her doctor also told her that measuring blood pressure routinely is the only way to know if it's a problem.*

While most people have no symptoms of hypertension, there are a few signs of extremely high blood pressure. These include severe headaches, nausea/vomiting, chest pains, blurry vision, anxiety, shortness of breath, dizziness, buzzing in the ears, confusion, and nosebleeds. These symptoms are rare but generally indicate a serious blood pressure elevation.

### **What Causes High Blood Pressure?**

Hypertension stems from several interrelated risk factors, some of which can't be changed. Being over 65 years old, having family members with hypertension, and having diabetes or kidney disease are nonmodifiable risk factors for developing high blood pressure.

Risk factors that can be changed include eating excessive amounts of salt, being obese or overweight, lacking in physical exercise, and eating foods high in saturated fat (like red meats) and trans fats.

Excessively high blood pressure can be extremely dangerous. Untreated hypertension can lead to kidney failure, strokes, heart attacks, and heart failure.

### **How is High Blood Pressure Managed?**

Many anti-hypertensive medications exist to manage high blood pressure, including those that act on the brain, heart, blood vessels, and kidneys to lower the pressure in the arteries.

The [CDC](#) also recommends several ways to manage high blood pressure at home, including stopping smoking, eating less than 1500 mg of sodium-containing salt daily, reducing alcohol intake, maintaining a healthy weight, and eating more fruits and vegetables. When you exercise, be sure to break a sweat for at least 150 minutes each week. Stress-reducing activities like yoga, mindfulness meditation, and biofeedback can also help lower blood pressure.

*Despite being shocked by the diagnosis of hypertension, Malea was determined to manage her health by checking her blood pressure at home, exercising, and watching her daily salt intake. She tracked her numbers daily and lost some weight. While she still takes medication for hypertension every day, she hopes to be able to control her high blood pressure through ongoing lifestyle changes.*

*Alii Health Center was founded in 2007 with the mission to provide high-quality care to the West Hawaii community. It has grown to become a multispecialty clinical center providing caring and compassionate care to individuals of all ages and backgrounds.*

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