Can Young Adults Never Diagnosed With Hypertension Face an Increased Risk of Other Diseases?

Findings show that folks in their 20s and 30s with above-normal blood pressure may develop dementia or suffer a stroke later in life.

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Previous studies have linked high blood pressure and dementia risk. But a new study published in Neurology suggests that young adults with blood pressure (BP) levels above normal but not enough to be considered hypertensive are at an increased risk for brain shrinkage, which can lead to a decline in cognitive function and possibly dementia, stroke or other cerebrovascular diseases, reports the American Academy of Neurology.

The study included 423 people with an average age of 28 who had MRI brain scans and at least one blood pressure (BP) reading.

Results showed that 41 percent of participants had a BP under 120/80 mmHg, considered normal; about 30 percent had blood pressure readings from 120/80 to 129/84 mmHg; and nearly 20 percent posted BP measuring 130/85 to 139/89 mmHg. Eleven percent had high blood pressure, defined as above 140/90 mmHg.

Participants with above normal BP were more likely to show reduced quantities of gray matter in parts of the brain that included the frontal and parietal lobes, the hippocampus, amygdala and thalamus. (A loss of gray matter in these parts of the brain is linked with the onset of dementia.)

Scientists found that as blood pressure increased, gray matter decreased. But researchers cautioned that these findings don't confirm a cause-and-effect relationship between elevated blood pressure levels and a decrease in gray matter in the brain.

According to study author Arno Villringer, MD, of the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany, "This research suggests that treating high blood pressure or maintaining lower blood pressure in early adulthood might be essential for preventing the cascade from silent brain changes with no symptoms to organ damaging conditions such as stroke and dementia."

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