High Blood Pressure Can Accelerate Cognitive Decline No Matter the Age of Onset

To preserve cognitive function, hypertension must be prevented or diagnosed and effectively treated in adults of any age.

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About 108 million American adults are living with high blood pressure, also known as hypertension. That's nearly half the adult population in the United States. Now, new research published in the American Heart Association journal Hypertension reveals that these adults are at risk of experiencing a faster cognitive declinethan people with normal blood pressure—regardless of when the illness starts or its duration.

For the study, researchers reviewed previous data on blood pressure and cognitive decline for over 7,000 adults in Brazil. Participants—whose average age at the study's start was 59—were followed for about four years and underwent testing for memory, verbal fluency and executive function, which encompasses attention, concentration and additional factors connected with thinking and reasoning.

Findings showed that a systolic (the top number) blood pressure reading of 121 to 139 mmHg or a diastolic (the bottom number) blood pressure reading of 81 to 89 mmHg and no medication use was associated with a faster cognitive decline among middle-aged and older Brazilians.

What's more, cognitive decline accelerated regardless of how long a person had high blood pressure, meaning even shorter stints of hypertension could affect how quickly a person experienced cognitive decline.

Researchers also determined that adults who didn't have controlled high blood pressure were more likely to see their memory and overall cognitive function decline at a quicker rate than those who had the condition under control.

“In addition to other proven benefits of blood pressure control, our results highlight the importance of diagnosing and controlling hypertension in patients of any age to prevent or slow down cognitive decline,” said Sandhi M. Barreto, MD, PhD, a professor of medicine at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais in Brazil and one of the study’s authors.

Barreto noted that prehypertension levels were also associated with cognitive decline and concluded that the study’s findings reinforce the importance of maintaining lower blood pressure levels throughout life.

Although the study focused on Brazilians, Barreto said findingscould be applied to people across the world.

For related coverage, read “Blood Pressure Changes in Midlife May Affect Brain Health.”

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