

GET A PRESSURE DROP

Know how to get your blood pressure under control

BY VIC MOTUNE

Civil servant Byron Davis of Norbury, south London, is one person who knows the importance of 'knowing your numbers'.

The 44-year-old father of three first discovered he had high blood pressure when having a routine check up at his local clinic.

"It was an absolute shock to find out that I had high blood pressure, particularly because I didn't drink or smoke and exercised fairly regularly," said Byron, a civil servant and father of three.

CONTROL

"Many people with high blood pressure need to have it controlled with tablets, but my doctor said I may be able to avoid that by making changes to my lifestyle. I immediately started to make changes. I was eating a lot of bread, cereals and processed meats and cheeses, and hadn't realised how much salt they contain, so I cut those out.

"Within two weeks my blood pressure had lowered - the effect was that dramatic. I'm now much more conscious about what I eat. I even bake my own bread. My wife and three children are also much more salt aware. We never cook with salt and always check the salt content of food.

"Fortunately I now have my blood pressure under control. I'd urge everyone to get their blood pressure checked as, like me, you may not have any visible signs that you have high blood pressure."

Davis is one of the lucky ones. Statistics show that high blood pressure is the leading cause of death and disability among Britain's black community. Over 16 million people in the UK have high blood pressure, but more than five million are not aware they have the condition.

A recent study of 150 first- and second-generation black Caribbeans living in the West Midlands revealed that many of those surveyed suffered from hypertension, although they were totally unaware of it.

And according to some experts, high blood pressure affects almost 45 per cent of UK men of African or Caribbean background and 40 per cent of women.

With figures as high as this, campaigners say this is a health issue which the black community needs to take seriously.

The Blood Pressure Association (BPA), the UK's blood pressure charity, has launched a



BYRON DAVIS: bread solutions

campaign called 'Know Your Numbers' which is focusing on increasing awareness of the need to control blood pressure amongst high risk groups, especially those of African and Caribbean descent.

According to the BPA, people can avoid high blood pressure if they know what to do.

Research conducted by the BPA revealed that 86 per cent of those surveyed were aware that being overweight was a cause of high blood pressure, but only 32 per cent of respondents were aware that a diet high in fruit and vegetables is a key factor in reducing risk of high blood pressure.

Through the new campaign, they are encouraging people to know their blood pressure numbers in the same way as they know their height and weight, and if raised, take measures to lower it.

"The higher your blood pressure numbers, the greater your risk is of having a stroke, heart attack or heart failure," said Professor Graham MacGregor, an expert in cardiovascular medicine and Chairman of the BPA.

"Many people do not know that they have high blood pressure as it has no symptoms, which is why it is often known as the silent killer," added Professor MacGregor.

"The BPA's message to everybody is know your blood pressure numbers and take that first step in fighting heart disease and stroke," he said.

He added: "It's not fully understood why black Caribbean people are likely to have high blood pressure, and research is continuing.

However, we do know that a healthy diet combined with exercise and awareness can

make a vital difference in preventing early death. Generally, black Caribbean people are more sensitive to salt and traditional food is often made with salted fish or meat soaked in salt before cooking.

People often don't realise how much salt there is in seasonings used on fish or chicken, for example.

Try avoiding salted meats and fish, and using fresh herbs and spices instead of very salt-rich seasonings.

LOWER

He added: "You can lower your blood pressure by including plenty of fruit and vegetables in your diet. They are a good natural source of potassium, which has the opposite effect of salt and lowers blood pressure, and also contain anti-oxidants which prevent heart disease."

Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury (mmHg) and the reading produces two numbers, written in fraction format, with one on the top and one on the bottom. 140/90 mmHg is the level used to diagnose high blood pressure, and if your blood pressure is constantly raised above this level, it will need to be treated.

For people with diabetes, however, it is important that they have a lower blood pressure, ideally less than 130/80.

You can have your blood pressure checked by popping into one of 1,200 nationwide Lloyds pharmacies which offer free blood pressure checks throughout the year. Call 0800 389 2578 to find your nearest store.