Hypertension: Just the Facts

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Since the seventh report of the Joint National Committee on the Prevention, Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure was published, more people than ever are being classified as hypertensive. More than 58 million Americans, 29% of the adult population, have hypertension. An additional 45 million, or 22%, have prehypertension. Most patients are unaware of the condition because it largely is asymptomatic; in addition, only a minority of patients are controlled adequately. More than 90% of hypertension is idiopathic (primary or essential hypertension), whereas 25% is the result of other identifiable causes (secondary hypertension) (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2004).

The four goals of evaluation for hypertension are to (a) identify lifestyle factors contributing to elevated blood pressure and higher risk for cardiovascular disease, (b) assess associated modifiable cardiovascular risk factors, (c) assess for target organ disease, and (d) determine whether a secondary cause exists for blood pressure elevation (NIH, 2004).

Assessment of patients with hypertension should include (NIH, 2004)

- Verifcation of blood pressure in both arms with correct technique, with confirmation on more than one occasion, unless blood pressure meets criteria for urgency in treatment
- Height and weight
- Physical examination of head, eyes, ears, nose, and throat, including funduscopic examination for target organ disease, noting arteriovenous nicking, arteriolar narrowing, hemorrhages, papilledema, and exudates
- Physical examination of the neck with notation of carotid bruits, thyroid enlargement, and distended jugular veins
- Physical examination of the cardiovascular and pulmonary systems, noting increased or irregular rate, clicks, murmurs, the presence of S3 or S4, or rales
- Physical examination of the neurologic system to evaluate for any defects
- Physical examination of the abdomen for the presence of aortic or renal bruits, masses, abnormal aortic pulsation, or hepatomegaly
- Physical examination of the extremities for evidence of peripheral vascular disease with decreased or absent pulses or edema
- Laboratory evaluation, including complete blood count, fasting complete metabolic profile, thyroid-stimulating hormone, lipid profile, and possibly uric acid
- Radiologic evaluation, including electrocardiogram, echocardiogram, and chest x-ray.

When evaluating patients with cancer in particular, be aware that paraneoplastic syndrome can be a cause of hypertension. Many medications that patients with cancer may take also can precipitate...