

Do you have tension or hypertension?

by

Marius Meyer

One of the most important unintended consequences of the Covid-19 virus pandemic is that although it dominates the news, social media and most conversations there is a renewed focus on other aspects of health. The Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize has been very vocal and continuously highlighting the high impact of underlying health conditions, or comorbidities on the mortality rate of Covid-19 patients. In particular, cancer, diabetes, obesity, asthma and hypertension were mentioned as some of the top underlying health risks for Covid-19 deaths.

Today is World Hypertension Day, and therefore a good moment for putting the spotlight on hypertension, not only in relation to Covid-19, but also in dealing with it as a health risk on its own. According to Dr Mkhize, hypertension is elevated blood pressure and the number one contributing risk factor for global deaths.

According to the Department of Health, hypertension causes stroke, heart attacks, heart failure, kidney failure and blindness. South Africa has one of the highest hypertension rates in the world, with one in three adults living with hypertension. However, the Department states that only half the people who have hypertension know it. This means that a large proportion of people don't know that they have high blood pressure. That is the bad news, because it means that many people are potentially at risk for both hypertension and also Covid-19 without knowing it. The good news is that high blood pressure is preventable.

The Department of Health provides the following guidelines to reduce the risk of hypertension:

- Maintaining healthy bodyweight (focus on a good healthy diet and exercise);
- Exercising for an average of 30 minutes per day (use the 6:00 – 9:00am slot for outside exercise or any other time at home for exercise during the level 4 restrictions);
- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables daily (add this to your lockdown shopping list);
- Decrease consumption of salt, sugar and caffeine (reduce and manage your intake of these three high risk food categories);
- Don't smoke (listen to Ministers Mkhize and Dlamini-Zuma);
- Reduce alcohol intake (listen to the two Ministers again);
- Avoid stress where possible (manage your stress);
- Make time for relaxation (take breaks during your lockdown work).

All of us experience tension and high levels of stress during these abnormal times of being in lockdown while we suffer from increased levels of frustration, anxiety and panic about so many hardships you are facing, including the fear of being infected. Stress levels are at an all-time high and therefore needs to be managed by all people, whether you have hypertension or not.

I am blessed and fortunate to have inherited my father's low blood pressure. That is the luck of inheritance. But unfortunately, on my mother's side, she only discovered high blood pressure after a stroke. We need to raise awareness about hypertension and manage it more proactively, and once diagnosed, treat it with the necessary medication to prevent negative consequences.

In addition to everything I have learned about the Covid-19 virus over the past three months, the biggest lesson for me personally has been the importance of underlying health conditions. I never knew the word "comorbidities" before. With this knowledge we are faced with the reality of a serious national health risk given the seriousness of many of these underlying conditions. Many of these conditions are such a major health risk that they are killers on their own. Combined with Covid-19 your life is considerably shortened if you fail to recover from the coronavirus infection. That is the reason why medical teams all over the world have celebrated and applauded patients in wheelchairs or walking out alive from hospitals after recovering from the intense periods of being on ventilators as a result of Covid-19 treatment.

Let us add hypertension to our list of employee health and wellness priorities in developing an integrated employee wellness strategy at our organisations. Not only will it raise awareness and help us to reduce the health risk of hypertension, it will also enable us to include hypertension management as part of our strategy for reducing the risk of death due to the Covid-19 virus.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za