How to address hypertension control during the COVID-19 pandemic

JAN 7, 2021

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have postponed regular visits for chronic health conditions such as hypertension. To make matters worse, hypertension may increase risk for severe illness while cardiovascular disease is a predictor of seriously negative outcomes from COVID-19. That is why it is even more imperative for patients, physicians and other health professionals to make hypertension control a priority during the pandemic and beyond.

In a recent episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update,” U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams, MD, MPH, and other panelists discussed the ongoing importance of controlling hypertension during COVID-19. Learn about some ways physicians can sharpen their BP-control efforts during the pandemic and beyond.

Prioritize hypertension control

“These are challenging times and people with chronic diseases and conditions may be at increased risk for having severe illness from COVID-19,” said Dr. Adams. “Improving overall health in our patients is key to preventing these types of pandemics and health crises in the future and mitigating the current pandemic.

“It's important for people who have high blood pressure or hypertension to continue to take their medications as prescribed, especially in the midst of the pandemic and to self-monitor their blood pressure at home when and if they can,” he added.
“We need to start talking about uncontrolled hypertension as an epidemic and making it a national priority,” said Dr. Adams. “This can be done by increasing awareness of potential health risks associated with hypertension by recognizing the financial costs of uncontrolled hypertension and engaging new stakeholders, like employers, and by eliminating disparities in treatment and control of high blood pressure.”

Learn more about Dr. Adams’ call to action for hypertension control.

1. **Surgeon general: Hypertension control must be a national priority**
   Tailored strategies are needed to improve reach, equity of BP-control efforts across health care and other sectors of society.

2. **With hypertension rates up, 3 ways to draw focus on BP control**
   Dr. Adams provides three goals and strategies for physicians, health systems and organizations to follow to control hypertension. The first goal calls for hypertension control to become a national priority.

3. **How physicians can support hypertension control in the community**
   A cornerstone of hypertension control is living a heart-healthy lifestyle, which can be cultivated through community support. This is where community-level strategies that change the environment where people live, work, learn and play can impact health outcomes.

4. **BP control: Surgeon general’s guide to overcoming clinical inertia**
   When patients are receiving care for uncontrolled hypertension, it is vital that health care teams support medication initiation, intensification and adherence. Treatment also includes making healthy lifestyle changes when needed.

Embrace telehealth
“It's important to highlight that we've gone from 10,000 telehealth visits per week paid for by CMS to now tens of thousands of telehealth visits paid for on a daily basis here in the United States,” said Dr. Adams, who has hypertension. “There are few diseases that are as amenable to being treated telephonically as hypertension.

“We need to challenge ourselves to figure out how we can utilize home blood-pressure monitoring,” he added, noting that his SMBP device allows him to upload his measurements to his phone and share it with his doctor.

“We have so many tools available to decrease the number of people who are going without care or without seeing a physician, even if they can't have a face-to-face encounter,” said Dr. Adams.

Learn more from the AMA about strengthening long-distance care for chronic disease patients.

Encourage healthy diets, being active

“In the midst of COVID, we've all been told to sit at home and stay on our couches,” said Dr. Adams. “Everyone's ordering in, and we're doing that to protect ourselves from COVID, but guess what? That's increasing our risk for high blood pressure.”

It is important to “encourage people to try to think about creative ways to be active, even in the midst of a pandemic,” he said. “I actually keep two little weights next to my couch so that whenever I'm watching TV, it immediately goes to my mind that, ‘Hey, I can get up and do some curls and be active.’… There are ways that you can be active even while you're physically distancing.”

The AMA has developed online tools and resources created using the latest evidence-based information to support physicians to help manage their patients’ high BP. These resources are available to all physicians and health systems as part of Target: BP™, a national initiative co-led by the AMA and American Heart Association.

Target: BP offers annual, recurring?gold-level recognition?for all participating sites that achieve hypertension control rates of 70% or higher among their adult patient population, and participation level recognition for those sites that prioritize improving BP control each year and submit data.?In 2020, more than 1,000 organizations were recognized?for their efforts focusing on BP control within the populations they serve.