



Hypertension and Veggie Diets

by Joanne Eglash

After scientifically analyzing the impact of dietary changes on high blood pressure, nutritionist Susan E. Berkow, Ph.D., C.N.S., and physician Neal D. Barnard, M.D., authored a report revealing that a vegetarian diet can help patients with hypertension, according to the lead article in the January issue of the medical journal *Nutrition Reviews*.

The duo evaluated a variety of published studies on this topic, concluding that vegetarians in general are less apt to suffer from high blood pressure, also known as the “silent killer.” High blood pressure is dangerous because although there often are no symptoms, it contributes to severe health problems such as strokes and heart attacks. According to Berkow and Barnard, “plant-based dietary patterns are assigned with a significantly lower prevalence of hypertension and correspondingly lower risk of CVD (cardiovascular disease) and stroke.”

The two medical experts also note that vegetarians as a group are slimmer than the general population, which is one reason that their blood pressure is more likely to be in the optimal range. Also adding to the health of vegetarians is their increased intake of potassium.

“Many people fear the side effects of blood pressure-lowering drugs, along with the expense. Our analysis of 80 scientific studies suggests that a vegetarian diet may be a simple, drug-free treatment for the ‘silent killer,’” Dr. Berkow says. His advice to those who have hypertension: “Substitute a veggie burger for a hamburger tonight and have pasta marinara without the meatballs tomorrow. After about six weeks of such simple changes you might see your blood pressure—and your body weight—begin to drop.”

Before you make any changes in your diet, however, you should always check with your health care provider. High blood pressure is dangerous, and only a physician or other health expert can professionally evaluate your own health situation and advise re modifications.

One option for vegans who do suffer from hypertension and want to modify their diets to try lowering their blood pressure is the food plan known as the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, according to Georgianna Donadio D.C., M.Sc., Ph.D.. Dr. Donadio has conducted a private practice in Whole Person Health Care since 1976. She is the Founder and Director of The

New England School of Whole Health Education in Wellesley, Massachusetts; the pioneer of Whole Health Education and a provider of patient and healthcare professional education since 1977. For more information, visit www.wholehealtheducation.org.

Donadio says that the DASH diet is advantageous for lowering blood pressure because it is low in sodium and high in potassium. "It has been clinically proven to significantly reduce hypertension." In addition, the DASH diet is "low in total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol," says this expert.

The DASH diet includes extensive amounts of fruits and vegetables, as well as other foods, all of which result in an increase in potassium that serves to "calm the adrenals and nervous system," while the reduced sodium levels lower "vascular tension and swelling associated with hypertension," explains Donadio.

Consequently, she regards the DASH diet as one of the better "vegetarian-based diets around because it addresses eating certain amounts and kinds of foods that have been clinically shown to reduce the hypertension."

Wondering what kinds of vegetables and fruits to choose to battle hypertension? "Blackberries, carrot juice, orange juice, tomato juice (especially the low sodium kind) and of course bananas, are marvelous easy ways to get potassium," adds Donadio.

The DASH Diet is described in detail on the National Institutes of Health Web site. In addition to fruits and vegetables, the DASH diet includes grains and grain products, such as cereal, bread, and rice; and nuts, seeds, and legumes, such as almonds, sunflower seeds, and kidney beans. Although the government's Web site does list meats, poultry, and fish, it calls for "two or less" servings, making it easy for vegans to adapt the diet to their own guidelines. To learn more, visit <http://www.nih.gov/news/pr/apr97/Dash.htm>.

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