The Roots of Hypertension

By E Douglas Kihn, O.M.D.

 An estimated 65 million Americans suffer from hypertension, which is defined as a diastolic blood pressure reading of 140 or above, and/or a systolic reading at or above 90. This disease is sometimes referred to as the “silent killer”, because patients may notice no symptoms until it already has done serious damage to the heart, brain, kidneys, and eyes.

 Too much blood pressure means just that – *too much*. For practitioners of Chinese Medicine, this translates into only one basic concept – *excess*. It is a chronic excess of epidemic proportions in the U.S., and demolishes the false notion that only deficiencies can be of a chronic nature.

 According to the laws of physics and Chinese medicine, there are only three possible causes of an increase in pressure of any kind, in particular, pressure inside the blood vessels. They are extremely common chronic excesses among Americans and they are:

* Excess internal heat of the heart and liver
* Liver qi stagnation
* Spleen damp

 Picture in your mind a blood vessel filled with blood. The liquid molecules are always pushing outward against the inside walls of the vessel, keeping the vessel from collapsing and maintaining its structural integrity. Excessive pressure is the result of those molecules pressing too hard against the inside walls, and against the pump (the heart) that circulates the blood. This resistance places an abnormal burden on the heart and eventually causes dangerous events such as pump failure (heart attack) or a bursting of a vessel in the brain (stroke). Heart attacks and strokes are respectively the number one and number three causes of mortality in the U.S.

*Excess internal heat of the heart and liver*

 When you turn up the heat on a kettle of water, the water molecules expand (excess heat expands) against the sides of the vessel, eventually causing a venting of steam or even an explosion. Now picture that increased heat (yang excess) expanding the activity of blood molecules, causing them to press more vigorously against the inside walls of the blood vessel, thus raising blood pressure.

 Activity causes friction. Friction causes heat. Excess activity causes excess heat. The heart, the busiest of the internal organs, the organ that never sleeps, is in a constant state of friction and heat. Thus it is most susceptible to an increase of friction and heat. An abnormal increase of heart heat not only threatens the physical structure of the heart, but also deranges the shen, which resides in the heart.

 A chronic Increase in the friction and heat of the heart is the result of the slavish worship of speed and busyness that pervades all income levels, cultural subgroups, and civic communities in the U.S. The average full-time worker in the United States worked 1,979 hours in 2001, compared to the notoriously busy Japanese worker who worked 1,842 hours. (The Japanese have more vacation time.) The average French worker spent just 1531.7 hours on the job in that same year. Americans worked 29% more hours in 2001 than their calmer (and leaner) French counterparts.

 A RoperASW study published in the May 2003 issue *MONEY Magazine* found that Americans would rather have more money than more free time – 57 percent to 27 percent. Another RoperASW survey from 2001 found that the top reason for Americans to consider changing jobs was money at 57 percent. More personal time clocked in at just 12 percent. More money translates as *more activity – more internal friction.*

 Excess yang in the heart easily infects the liver, which as we know easily heats up, venting its hot and windy yang excess upwards, with such symptoms as rage, headaches, dizziness, painful eye disorders, and so on.

*Liver qi stagnation*

 Picture a blood vessel with a band around it that can be tightened or loosened at will. When the band is tightened, the space inside is reduced. The same quantity of blood molecules is now trying to pass through a smaller space, and as they struggle, they will press more vigorously against the insides of the blood vessel. This situation increases the pressure on the vessel and the pump behind it.

 When Americans daily stagnate their mental and physical qi by giving in to worry and anxiety and choosing not to exercise, various muscles – any muscle in the body actually – tighten up in a perceived (but false) emergency “fight-or-flight” response. Most often, these muscular contractions that can affect any organ or body part are unconscious, but a common effect is to constrict the flow of qi and blood coursing through veins and arteries, thus leading to hypertension.

*Spleen damp*

 Picture a blood vessel. Now increase the number of molecules within that vessel. This excess yin will press more forcefully against the insides of the vessel, thus leading to increased pressure on the vessel walls and the heart (hypertension).

 Excessive yin (molecules) in the body comes from only one source – excess nutrition (mostly excess calories) entering through the mouth and passing into the digestive system. This excess yin causes a damp spleen (and a weakened spleen qi), strongly evidenced by an unprecedented increase in overweight Americans. By all official estimates (the U.S. Surgeon General, the World Health Organization, et al), two-thirds of Americans are *officially* overweight. These excess molecules easily find their way into the blood, causing congestion and increasing blood pressure.

 Very often, congested yin takes the form of cholesterol, which packs the insides of blood vessels, thus decreasing space and raising pressure. Cholesterol – lipids dense in calories – is stored nutrition, food that isn’t being used, also known to us as food stagnation. Chinese Medicine perceives a close relationship between dampness and food stagnation. The two terms are commonly interchangeable. Food stagnation is always the result of a damp and weakened spleen, even when excess weight is not in evidence.

 Excessive eating and excess nutrition – chronic excess yin - is always the result of choice, and is commonly resorted to by Americans for the purposes of:

1. Calming and descending excessive internal heat and wind, and
2. Calming and relaxing the tightening effects of liver qi stagnation.

 In a 2003 study by UC San Francisco researchers, it was discovered that the consumption of “comfort foods” is part of a complex feedback system that turns off the release of stress hormones such as cortisol.

*The Treatment of Hypertension*

 Diagnosis precedes treatment. First, using standard Chinese medical methods of evaluation, determine what percentages of the three root causes are operating in each specific case. In most hypertensive Americans, all three are present in varying degrees.

 Next, devise appropriate techniques (Chinese medicinal formulas, acupuncture point prescriptions, etc.) that will assist the body in its inherent attempts to remove the excesses.

 Chronic excesses are always the result of inappropriate choices, which in our situation are the result of American cultural imperatives. These inappropriate choices point the finger directly at the shen. What separates the superior physician from the medical technician is the willingness and ability to counsel the shen, to move beyond mere technique and effectively address the root causes of a problem.

 Getting Americans to change their thinking and their lives to the extent that hypertension is not only resolved but even prevented from returning is a challenge that only the superior physician will prove capable of meeting.