

High blood pressure? A little DASH might do it

BY ANNE BURKLEY
For The Patriot-News

The DASH diet has all the hallmarks of a great fad. The name is catchy, the claims seem outrageous, there is a best-selling book about it and it's got glowing endorsements. In June, DASH was ranked the No. 1 diet plan by US News & World Report.

Sounds too good to be true, but this diet is the real deal. It was created after analyzing the results of a large clinical study sponsored by The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute to examine the effects of diet on hypertension, also known as high blood pressure.

The catchy name stands for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension, and it's been documented to lower blood pressure in just two months. In fact, those who followed the diet and restricted salt intake to 1,500 milligrams per day, were able to decrease their blood pressure as much or more than they could with medication.

If you don't have hypertension, but crave a healthier lifestyle, DASH is reputed to be one of the most sensible and nutritious diets available. It's also been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, cancer and osteoporosis. And those glowing endorsements aren't from celebrities, but organizations such as the American Heart Association, United States Department of Agriculture and National Institutes of Health.

DASH eating plan



WHOLE GRAINS
6-8 servings per day



VEGETABLES
4-5 servings per day



FRUITS
4-5 servings per day



NONFAT & LOW-FAT DAIRY
2-3 servings per day



LEAN MEATS, POULTRY & FISH
6 ounces or less per day



NUTS, SEEDS & LEGUMES
4-5 per week



FATS & OILS
2-3 per day



SWEETS & ADDED SUGARS
5 or less per week

SOURCE: "Your Guide to Lowering Your Blood Pressure With DASH"

pressure without medication through diet."

So what makes DASH different? For starters, it focuses on what you should be eating rather than what you shouldn't. The diet was structured to include foods that are high in fiber, low in fat and rich in magnesium, potassium and calcium, which have been shown to maintain healthy blood pressure. Taking supplements has not been shown to have the same positive effect as when the minerals are consumed in food.

The most notable difference between DASH and other popular diets is that it encourages the consumption of a lot of fruits and vegetables. The DASH diet recommends four to five servings of fruits and four to five servings of vegetables a day. According to a 2010 Gallup poll, less than half of Americans reported eating five or more combined servings of fruits and vegetables on five or more

days per week.

"They really are that important," Glunz said. In fact, she has never attended a lecture, class, conference, seminar or read a book or article about any health condition where the importance of eating fruits and vegetables wasn't stressed.

In addition to fruits and vegetables, DASH emphasizes whole grains and low-fat or nonfat dairy products. Contrasting with popular high-protein diets, the diet allows for 6 ounces of lean meat per day. The diet offers plenty of protein through its daily or weekly recommendations for lean meats, dairy and nuts, legumes and beans. It probably won't come as a surprise that sweets and fats are limited and that overly processed foods are not recommended.

"It's not a weight-loss meal plan, but if you make beneficial heart-healthy changes to your eating

habits — especially if your previous ones were not — you're going to lose weight," said Jody Dixon, registered dietitian with PinnacleHealth System.

"No matter what meal plan you're on, it comes down to portion sizes; we eat too much," Dixon said. Instead of looking to achieve a number — whether it's weight, blood pressure, sugar level — strive to change your lifestyle and the numbers will follow.

"Of course, the key is to make changes that are permanent," Dixon said.

Getting started

Familiarize yourself with the meal plan and chose one or two aspects to start with, Dixon recommended. If you already eat three vegetables per day, add in another. When that becomes comfortable, start consuming lean and fat-trimmed meats and gradually lower

the amount you eat to fit the recommendations.

Trying to change everything at once is a recipe for failure.

"There is no other goal in our lives that we approach the way we try to approach diet changes. For some reason, people think they have to do everything at once," Glunz said. "If your goal was to pay off your car loan you'd do it one payment at a time, right?"

It's also important to view every positive change as a victory. "If all you manage to do is consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables, that alone would be a great thing," Glunz said.

Grocery shopping

With its emphasis on whole foods, shoppers will be spending a lot more time (and money) on the perimeter of the store. There isn't a whole lot of room for inexpensive, high-

ly-processed, nutrient-void foods on the DASH diet.

Glunz suggested shopping for produce that is in season and stocking up on healthy canned or frozen fruits and vegetables and lean cuts of meats when they go on sale. Items such as whole-grain pastas, sauces, oatmeal and dried lentils and beans are a great bang for your nutritional buck.

When preparing meals, explore different cooking options — especially when it comes to vegetables and fruits. Don't limit yourself to boiled vegetables. The same vegetable will have a different flavor and texture when grilled, steamed or roasted.

As far as expense goes, "You pay for it now or you pay for it later," Glunz said. "I'd rather pay for it now with the cost of fruits and vegetables and whole foods, than pay for it in hospital bills and medications."

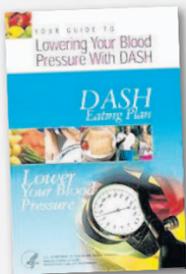
The DASH difference

According to the National Institutes of Health, high blood pressure affects more than 65 million — or one in three — American adults.

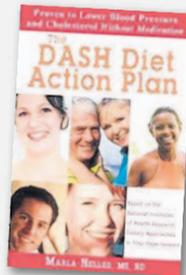
"People don't realize how closely related hypertension and diet are," said Sarah Glunz, in-store nutritionist at the Giant Food Store in Susquehanna Twp. "For most people, though not for everyone, they can reduce blood

DASH diet guides

- www.dashdietoregon.org — Although it is a website of the Oregon Dairy Council, this is a comprehensive, easy-to-navigate site about the benefits of the DASH diet. Includes recipes, worksheets, resources and an explanation of the science and research behind the study.



- "Your Guide to Lowering Your Blood Pressure With DASH" can be downloaded at www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/new_dash.pdf. The free 64-page e-book from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services includes information on DASH, a meal plan and recipes.



- "The DASH Diet Action Plan" The book by Marla Heller offers practical tips and strategies for following DASH, 28 days of calorie-adjusted meal plans and recipes. Includes a weight-loss plan.

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