



# DIURETICS: ONE KIND OF HYPERTENSION MEDICATION

If you have high blood pressure, your doctor may prescribe blood pressure medications to help lower it. Most people with high blood pressure need to take two or more medications to control their blood pressure. This handout is about one kind of hypertension medication called diuretics.

## What is hypertension?

Hypertension means having higher than normal blood pressure. Blood pressure is the force of your blood on the walls of your blood vessels. This force, or pressure, enables blood to pump throughout your body. Everyone needs a certain amount of pressure to make this process possible. When the force of blood against your artery walls is too strong you have high blood pressure or hypertension.

When you have hypertension, your heart has to work too hard to send blood throughout your body. By lowering your blood pressure, you can help take this extra demand off your heart and blood vessels.

The top number (119/79) of your blood pressure measurement represents the systolic pressure. This is the force of blood against your arteries when your heart is sending blood to

your body. The lower number (119/79) is the diastolic pressure. This is the force of blood against your arteries while your heart relaxes between beats. Both numbers are important. Here are the ranges for different levels of blood pressure:

blood pressure measurements	
normal:	119 / 79 or lower
prehypertension:	120-139 / 80-89
hypertension:	140 / 90 or higher 130 / 80 if you have diabetes or kidney disease

## What is a diuretic?

A diuretic—sometimes called a water pill—is very effective medication for lowering blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure, taking a diuretic every day can help lower your chance of having a heart attack or stroke.

You may be prescribed one of these diuretics:

- Hydrochlorothiazide (HCTZ)
- Chlorthalidone

## How does taking a diuretic lower my blood pressure?

Diuretics work in the kidneys by helping your body get rid of excess water and sodium when you urinate. Having extra fluid in your body can contribute to high blood pressure.

It is common to take other medications in addition to a diuretic to lower your blood pressure. Ask your doctor or other health professional for more information about other medications which could help you.

## What problems could I have taking a diuretic?

Most people who take diuretics do not experience any side effects or problems. Some people may urinate more frequently. While this frequent urination is typically not a health concern, it may be a nuisance. If frequent urination interferes with your daily activities, talk with your doctor about your options. Many times, once a person adjusts to the medication, the side effects go away.

A few people who take a high dose of a diuretic can have low potassium levels in their body. We all need potassium in our bodies. Most of the time, a low-dose diuretic, which is the



dose most commonly prescribed, does not cause a change in potassium levels. To be cautious, if you are taking a certain dosage of a diuretic, your doctor may ask you to have your potassium level checked at the laboratory. If your potassium is low, you may want to eat more bananas, broccoli, or other high potassium foods. If you are concerned about side effects or potassium, talk directly with your doctor. There are other effective blood pressure medications that might work better for you.

If you are over 70 years of age, you may have dizziness during the first two weeks of taking a diuretic. You may want to get up slowly or sit down if you feel dizzy. If this symptom is bothersome or does not go away, please speak with your doctor.

## How can I reduce the risk of having problems taking a diuretic?

- Do not take a diuretic if you are pregnant or may become pregnant in the near future.
- Tell your doctor or other health care professional if you have kidney problems or gout.

When you take any medication consider the benefits compared with the small chance of experiencing a side effect. Diuretics control blood pressure and lower your risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Talking with your doctor about any side effects you have can help you and your doctor choose the medicine and dose that best suits your needs.

## How do diuretics fit into my hypertension treatment?

Diuretics are an important part of treatment. They do not take the place of healthy eating, regular physical activity, and stress management. If you are prescribed a diuretic by your doctor or other health care professional, it's important for you to take it as directed. Don't stop taking your medication without consulting with your doctor or other health care professional first. If you have side effects, your doctor may be able to change your medication or the dosage to prevent them. It's likely that you may need to take the medication for the rest of your life, so work with your doctor to ensure that you are taking the right medicine and dose for you.

## What do I need to know about my diuretic?

Take the time to ask your doctor or other health care professional about your medication:

- Why am I taking this medication?
- How often and how long should I take it?
- Are there any special instructions for taking this particular medication?
- Should I only take it at mealtime?
- Are there activities that I should avoid while taking this medication?
- What kind of side effects could I have and what symptoms should I look for?
- Is there a way to avoid any side effects?

## How can I remember to take my medications?

Everyone has struggled with remembering to do things that they don't regularly do. There are a number of things that can help you remember.

- Make a simple chart. Post it in an obvious place where you will see it every day, like on the mirror in the bathroom.
- Set an alarm clock or watch as a reminder.
- Establish a daily routine for taking your medications, such as at bedtime, mealtime, or before a daily TV show, such as the evening news.
- Use a pillbox with 7 sections, representing the days of the week.
- Record taking your medications on a wallet card or calendar.
- Can you think of others?

## Other resources

- To find more information about your diuretic or any other medications, connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org), click on the "Get Advice" tab, and then click on "Drug Encyclopedia."
- Contact your facility's Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and other resources.

If you feel you cannot afford your medication, financial assistance may be available. To learn more, talk to your Kaiser Permanente pharmacist or call the Kaiser Permanente Medical Financial Assistance Program (MFAP) at 1-866-399-7696.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.