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*[As seen in regional & national
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DEAL WITH THE PRESSURE

WHETHER YOU'RE PLAYING in your state amateur championship, local club championship, or weekly foursome, the pressure of making a particular shot can certainly get to you. For me, it's those dreaded three-footers! But there's another type of pressure that can harm you even more, and have *far* more damaging long-term effects – *high blood* pressure. But, what if addressing one kind of pressure could actually help the other? And, what if golf could even be beneficial for the prevention and treatment of high blood pressure?

High blood pressure, or *hypertension*, means the amount of force your blood exerts against the walls of your arteries is too high. It affects more than 60 million Americans and is the most common outpatient diagnosis or abnormality *incidentally* found by physicians. Several PGA Tour players have had great success despite dealing with hypertension, including Nick Price, Jack Nicklaus, and Englishman Sam Torrance, among many others.

The official guidelines and definitions for what defines hypertension are becoming much more stringent, so more and more people are now being diagnosed who were "borderline normal" before. The majority of people have *essential* or *primary* hypertension, meaning that there is no specific cause. It usually begins between the ages of 25 and 55, being more common in African-Americans than Caucasians. For some reason, it is actually quite rare in non-Western societies!

Commonly referred to as the "silent killer," hypertension usually has little or no symptoms until the blood pressure becomes quite high. Once symptoms are present, such as headaches, blurred vision, flushing, chest pains, slurred speech, or shortness of breath, the situation is more urgent. Left untreated, people with hypertension have an increased incidence of multiple medical problems, including heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, and eye disease. Unfortunately, without any nagging, chronic symptoms, hypertension tends to be very easy to ignore!

Who is most at risk for developing hypertension? Anyone with hypertensive parents or siblings certainly has an increased likelihood. Also, blood pressure naturally increases with age, as well as with male gender, poor diet (especially high salt intake), obesity, excessive alcohol use, and smoking. It's also been discovered that people who eat less calcium, potassium, and vitamins A and C also have a higher incidence. Fortunately, several of these can be modified.

The first thing to do is to determine your blood pressure reading, which is easily done at your doctor's office. Keep in mind that the blood pressure machines found at the local grocery or drug stores are notoriously inaccurate, so don't necessarily trust them. And, one high reading does not always mean that you have hypertension. It takes several high readings over time to make the diagnosis, but even one high reading does increase

your likelihood. Generally, the only instance where someone is treated after a first-time elevation is if the reading is significantly high.

When it comes to treatment of hypertension, there are several pieces of good news. The first is that prescription medications are not always necessary. Dietary modification should always be one of the mainstays of treatment, whether or not there is a need for medications. Weight reduction has been shown to help, as have moderation of salt and alcohol intake. Dietary supplementation with potassium, calcium, and magnesium, along with a decrease in caffeine intake, may also be helpful. Increased intake of fruits and vegetables, with decreased fat intake, can also be beneficial. Vitamin B supplementation is being studied and may also prove to be useful, particularly in those over 60. Finally, there are many herbal remedies on the market, but you should always exercise caution and talk with your physician before taking any of them.

Now for more good news – golf can actually help you fight high blood pressure! It appears that people who are sedentary and out of shape have an increased risk of developing hypertension. Exercise, such as walking the golf course, can significantly lower blood pressure, an effect that is even more dramatic in African-Americans, and certainly works even for older people. So maybe it's time to park that golf cart and start walking the course! This may even help your scores, through improved concentration, focus, and the more relaxed attitude that walking can bring!

But how is learning to manage your emotions and stress levels, in order to sink that tricky three foot putt, supposed to help with your blood pressure? Well, it turns out that many stress management techniques help to decrease your level of adrenaline and consequently your blood pressure. Mind body techniques such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, and pilates can be beneficial to your game from both a physical (via increased flexibility) and mental/emotional standpoint. It is usually easy to find beginning classes in your area and is certainly much more fun to do with a friend. Finally, simple deep breathing, before a difficult shot or any other time you feel stress, is the simplest form of meditation, and, especially if done routinely, has been shown to help lower your blood pressure. And, it's so simple, yet something we almost always forget to do!

If prescription medications turn out to be needed, it's important to know that there are many different types of drugs to treat hypertension, several of which are likely best suited to your particular situation, but all of which have possible side effects. So don't get discouraged if the first one you try doesn't work well. There is no "magic formula," and it commonly comes down to trial and error of different drugs and drug combinations. And remember, beginning drug therapy does *not* mean that you now can abandon all the other healthy lifestyle modifications you've made – they are still helping!

Remember, treatment of hypertension can greatly minimize any potential future complications. And golf, in particular walking the course, can even be good for helping to control it. Finally, some of the same techniques that you can use to decrease your blood pressure can also help shave a few strokes off your game, not to mention increasing your overall enjoyment of the game! But as always, check with your doctor before beginning any new diet, physical regimen, or alternative remedies.

So, deal with the pressure – both types – don't let it deal with you.

