



High blood pressure: Doctors put the brakes on the pharmaceutical industry © Zentrum der Gesundheit
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Doctors raise threshold for blood pressure Medication

upg / **More than one million Swiss suffer from high blood pressure. Some of them will be able to do without medication in the future.**

Good news for many patients with high blood pressure: the European Societies of Hypertension (ESH) and Cardiology (ESC) are taking a step back and recommending drug treatment only if blood pressure levels regularly rise **above 140/90 millimeters of mercury** (mm Hg) at rest (above 150 millimeters for those over 80). This was decided by a 24-member expert panel last week at the ESH annual meeting in Milan. Previously, the recommendation was to push the value **below 130 millimeters** (upper value) of mercury.

Independent research group for limit value of 160 mm Hg

However, even **mild hypertension with a value between 140 and 159 mm Hg** (upper value) **and/or 90-99 mm Hg** (lower value) is probably treated unnecessarily with medication. The harm of the side effects is probably greater than the benefit in this mild hypertension. This was the conclusion of a study commissioned by the independent Cochrane organization last year. Especially when the first (systolic) reading is between 140 and 159 and/or the second (diastolic) reading is between 90 and 99 ("mild" hypertension), the benefit of antihypertensive drugs has not been proven. Nevertheless, many physicians would prescribe medication to such patients, ostensibly to avoid the risk of high pressure-related vascular damage and thus heart attacks and strokes.

Diana Diao of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and her colleagues prepared the analysis on behalf of the Cochrane Organization. The Cochrane Organization evaluates scientific studies and publishes the results in reviews in its online database. The scientists involved do not receive any money from pharmaceutical companies.

Diao looked at four studies with a total of 9,000 patients who had mild hypertension but no heart disease. The patients were treated with various antihypertensive drugs for four to five years. Result: Whether the study participants took antihypertensive drugs or not made no statistically significant difference in the incidence of heart attack, stroke or death. **Nearly one in ten patients in the drug group discontinued treatment because of side effects.** "We don't know whether the benefits of treatment outweigh the harms," Diana Diao concludes.

Jerome Hoffman, professor emeritus of medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles, was more explicit. Treating mild hypertension with drugs could be of great benefit primarily to the pill maker, he said. "But it was almost predictable that this therapy would have little or no value for patients," Hoffman told the U.S. online magazine "Slate.

As late as the end of the 1980s, blood pressure values were **only** considered to be in need of treatment from **160/100**. But since the 1990s, guidelines issued by the Swiss Hypertension Society, whose secretariat was run by Roche, have been recommending medication for blood pressure levels as low as 140/90. **This more than doubled the number of "sick" people in one fell swoop.** The industry generates billions in sales with antihypertensives.

At the time, the pharmaceutical companies could not have dreamed up a better commercial than the bold Blick headline: "High blood pressure: 1 million Swiss at risk". The "clueless" would "urgently" need medication. Because even "small deviations" from the ideal blood pressure are "harmful".

Such media campaigns, as well as the influence of the pharmaceutical industry on the medical bodies that define the treatment limits, subsequently led to the extremely low threshold of 130 millimeters of mercury that still applies today. If the levels were above this, people were already considered to be in need of treatment and became customers of the pharmaceutical industry.

Pharma paid to decision-making body

Mercury levels are not the only trigger for drug treatment. When the American Society of Hypertension set out to define other risk factors and reasons for taking medication, pharmaceutical companies **Novartis, Merck and Sankyo** paid the medical society \$75,000. The three companies also raised another \$700,000 to make the new criteria known to physicians. The New York Times reported this in 2006 and demanded that the pharmaceutical companies refrain from defining new diseases. Novartis spokesman Satoshi J. Sugimoto confirmed the payments but saw "no conflict of interest." The industry exerted "no *inappropriate* influence," he said.

It's no wonder that the big pharmaceutical companies are generating billions in sales with drugs to combat high blood pressure. Their commercial interest in the lowest possible limits is evident.

"Sales teams" argue like commercials

Treating physicians are exposed to many shalms of the industry. They constantly have to deal with representatives of pharmaceutical companies. For a high-turnover hypertension drug, the various manufacturers go after doctors with entire "sales teams," former Novartis CEO (2000-2007) Thomas Ebeling explained in rare candor to the NZZ. This

"Sales teams" have to get "exactly the same messages across as a TV commercial." For pharmaceutical companies, sales and market share are the be-all and end-all, he said. They spend 30 to 35 percent of their billion-dollar sales on marketing, Ebeling said. For research and development, 13 percent is enough.

You can influence these risk factors yourself

Several factors contribute to high blood pressure. The more risk factors you eliminate, the more you can lower your blood pressure without medication. Without medication, you don't risk long-term serious side effects. You can influence the following risk factors yourself:

1. Lack of exercise
2. Overweight
3. Smoking
4. Disturbances of the lipid metabolism (e.g. increased cholesterol levels)
5. Diabetes (diabetes)
6. Chronic kidney disease
7. Too much alcohol consumption
8. Excessive salt intake (convenience foods!)

9. Constant stress

10. Medication (e.g. rheumatism medicines, birth control pills)

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APPLICABLE DEFINITIONS

Mild hypertension:

140-159 mm Hg and/or 90-99 mm Hg

Moderately elevated blood pressure:

160-179 mm Hg and/or 100-109 mm Hg

Severe hypertension

≥180 mm Hg and/or ≥110 mm Hg

Moderately and severely elevated blood pressure can be treated with medication with great benefit.

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