HYPERTENSIVE URGENCY (ASYMPTOMATIC SEVERE HYPERTENSION): CONSIDERATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

Hypertension is one of the most common chronic medical conditions in Canada. More than one in five Canadians has hypertension and the lifetime risk of developing hypertension is 90%.\(^1\) With the addition of comorbid conditions and other risk factors, hypertensive cases can quickly become even more complex. Hypertensive crises include hypertensive urgencies & emergencies. Optimal management lacks conclusive evidence. The rate of associated major adverse cardiovascular events in asymptomatic patients seen in the office are very low.\(^13\) Since rapid treatment of hypertensive urgency is not required, some prefer to call it asymptomatic severe hypertension.

### WHAT IS HYPERTENSIVE URGENCY & HOW DOES IT COMPARIS HYPERTENSIVE EMERGENCY?\(^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9}\)

The term hypertensive crises can be further divided into hypertensive urgency and hypertensive emergency. The distinction between these two conditions is outlined below.\(^6\) Differentiating between these scenarios is essential before initiating treatment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Hypertensive Urgency</th>
<th>Hypertensive Emergency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood Pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>&gt;180 systolic &amp;/or &gt;120 - &gt;130 diastolic</td>
<td>Yes: currently experiencing (e.g. aortic dissection, angina/ACS, stroke, encephalopathy, acute renal failure, pulmonary edema, eclampsia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Organ Damage*</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms</td>
<td>Asymptomatic; or severe headache, shortness of breath, nosebleeds, severe anxiety</td>
<td>Shortness of breath, chest pain, numbness/weakness, change in vision, back pain, difficulty speaking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Signs of end-organ damage/dysfunction may occur at a lower blood pressure in pregnant & pediatric patients

### Initial Patient Work-Up to Differentiate Between Urgency and Emergency:
- Verify blood pressure (BP) reading(s). Ensure proper technique for measuring BP (e.g. patient’s feet flat on the floor & arm supported)
  (Please refer to Hypertension Canada’s Blood Pressure Measurement Information Sheet for more detailed guidance).
- Obtain medical history & current medication list (prescription, OTC, recreational)
- Physical exam - focus on any signs of target organ damage (e.g. shortness of breath, chest pain, numbness/weakness)
- Lab tests & investigations may be required (e.g. CBC, ECG, urinalysis, renal function; ultrasound for aortic dissection if very high BP)
- Hypertensive urgency is not an emergency and its management is much less aggressive (see below). Diagnosis of a hypertensive emergency requires rapid intervention to lower BP in the emergency department (e.g. IV nitroprusside, IV labetalol, or IV nicardipine).\(^{1-12}\)

### WHAT CAUSES HYPERTENSIVE URGENCY?
- Most patients presenting with hypertensive urgency have been previously diagnosed with hypertension. Severe BP elevations may result from inadequate control on or poor adherence to current antihypertensive drug regimens.\(^2,8\) Another cause for patients reaching hypertensive urgency or emergency is previous inaccurate BP measurements that underestimate or do not detect increased BP at all (e.g. poor patient technique for self-monitoring).
- A patient’s BP can also be elevated by other factors, including:
  - Drugs \(^7\)
    - Prescription: ADHD medications (e.g. methylphenidate), antidepressants (e.g. venlafaxine, bupropion, desipramine), calcineurin inhibitors (e.g. cyclosporine, tacrolimus), corticosteroids, estrogens, midodrine, NSAIDs (e.g. ASA, ibuprofen, naproxen, diclofenac, celecoxib), testosterone, triptans
    - Non-Prescription: decongestants (e.g. pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine), NSAIDs (ibuprofen, naproxen), topical ASA or diclofenac
  - Recreational: stimulants (e.g. amphetamines like crystal meth or ecstasy), anabolic steroids, caffeine, cocaine, phencyclidine.
  - Energy drinks containing taurine, guarana root, yerba mate, glucuronolactone, etc.
  - Lifestyle\(^1\): - High salt diet, excessive alcohol use.
  - Comorbid Conditions\(^2\):
    - Thyroid storm, trauma, renovascular disease, acute ischemic stroke or adrenal dysfunction
- Some population groups are more likely to experience hypertensive urgency \(^10\): Elderly; African Americans; Men > Women

### HOW SHOULD HYPERTENSIVE URGENCY BE MANAGED?\(^3,11\)

**Previously Treated Hypertension:** trying one the following may be appropriate interventions (in no particular order)
- Restart/resume medications in non-adherent patients
- Increase the dose of current antihypertensive medications
- Add another antihypertensive agent from another class

**Unrelated Hypertension:** Choice of treatment depends on patient and the setting (e.g. emergency room versus doctor’s office)
- Temporary use of fast acting oral antihypertensives (e.g. clonidine, labetalol, captopril) may be used to gradually reduce BP over several hours, depending on the condition of the patient. The following page highlights potential options.
- However, reduction of BP over 24-48 hours with longer acting agents (e.g. ramipril 10 mg, metoprolol SR (or XL) \(^15\) 100 mg, or nifedipine XL 30 mg) is usually preferred over temporary use of short-acting agents.

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**Adjusted & optimize hypertensive regimen!**

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Continued on next page.
Drug Considerations for Acute Blood Pressure Lowering in Hypertensive Urgency

[NOTE: Often adjusting or initiating longer acting meds is preferred over using acute meds for short term management]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRUG</th>
<th>DOSE/ PHARMACOKINETICS</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>CONTRAINDICATIONS (CI)/ ADVERSE EFFECTS (AE)/ DRUG INTERACTIONS (DI)</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captorpli</td>
<td><strong>Acute Dose:</strong> 3.125-12.5 mg po/s (repeat 1-2 times at a 30-60min interval) <strong>Max:</strong> 150mg TID for hypertension (but seldom used at this dose) <strong>Onset:</strong> fastest of all ACE-I <strong>Peak Effect:</strong> 1 hour (sI); 1-2 hours (po) <strong>Duration:</strong> 4-8 hours</td>
<td>- Benefits for cerebral autoregulation &amp; blood flow - Favorable effect on regional myocardial perfusion - Reduces pre- and afterload - No fluid retention - OK in chronic management of HF &amp; scleroderma - Can use sl, but unlikely any therapeutic advantage</td>
<td>CI: bilateral renal artery stenosis; immune-mediated diseases; pregnancy ARB: cough, rash, dizzy, fatigue; angioedema, ↑K+, dysgeusia DI: diuretic x sparing ↑K+, gold injection natriuretic reaction, lithium ↑ U level, NSAID β BP effect &amp; K'/ BACTRIM/ Spironolactone ×K+</td>
<td>DRUG INTERACTIONS: (DI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clonidine</td>
<td><strong>Acute Dose:</strong> 0.05-0.2 mg po (can repeat q 1-2 hour) <strong>Maximum:</strong> 0.6-0.8 mg po/day for acute use <strong>Onset:</strong> 30-60 minutes <strong>Peak Effect:</strong> 2-4 hour <strong>Duration:</strong> 3-12 hour</td>
<td>- Decreases heart rate (in ~4% of patients) - No increase in myocardial oxygen consumption</td>
<td>CI: 2/3/3 degree heart block; caution in HF (due to potential β cardiac output) AB: Sedation (up to 50%); orthostatic hypotension; dramatic β cerebral blood flow DI: blood pressure</td>
<td>DRUG INTERACTIONS: (DI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labetalol</td>
<td><strong>Acute Dose:</strong> 200-400 mg po (can repeat q 6-12 hr PRN) <strong>Maximum:</strong> 1200 mg po/day for hypertension <strong>Onset:</strong> variable (30-120 minutes) <strong>Peak Effect:</strong> 3-4 hours <strong>Duration:</strong> 8-12 hours</td>
<td>- Favorable cardiac and possible central nervous system effects - Mixed alpha/beta antagonist - Used in pregnancy</td>
<td>CI: HF; reactive airway disease; 2/3/3 degree heart block AB: fatique, insomnia, ↓ HR, impotence, ↓ exercise tolerance, dizzy, cold extremities, bronchospasm tx: intravenous, HA, mask &amp; delay sx hypoglycemia, ↑ TG, ↓ HDL DI: antidiabetics; CCB synergistic &amp; HR; clonidine hypertension crisis; digoxin ↓ HR; fluconazole, insulins, NSAIDS ↑ β &amp; ↑ renal fx; &amp; phenobarbital, cimetidine β effect. - A standard dose that reliably &amp; quickly lowers BP has not been firmly established - Beta blockers, in general, may have decreased efficacy in the elderly</td>
<td>DRUG INTERACTIONS: (DI)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Are the Follow-Up & Monitoring Parameters for Hypertensive Urgency?

- The patient should be observed for a few hours to confirm that they are stable/improving & asymptomatic
- Once stable, the patient can be sent home with close follow-up (every 1-2 days) involving:
  - Evaluation for signs of hypertension or hypotension
  - Attainment of BP goals with the help of antihypertensives and lifestyle interventions (e.g. low salt diet, increased physical activity)
  - BP goals may vary depending on the patient and any existing comorbid conditions. For example, elderly patients (especially those >80 years old) may do better on less aggressive therapy (See RxFiles Chart: Drug Treatment in the Elderly & Long Term Care)
  - Assessment of medication adherence (consider simplified dosing schedules, & adherence aides, if appropriate)
- If there are concerns about patient adherence to follow up, especially if there is high risk of cerebrovascular or cardiovascular disease, hospital admission may be warranted for initial management

What About Immediate Release Nifedipine?

Immediate release nifedipine ADALAT (5, 10mg capsules) is not typically used for the management of hypertension because of increased MI, stroke and mortality risk. It is listed in the Beers criteria for potentially inappropriate medication use in older adults. See Geri-RxFiles for details.

Related Resources:

- Hypertension Management Guidelines:
  - Canadian (CHF 2013): http://www.hypertension.ca/chez-resources-and-downloads
  - British (NICE 2011): http://www.nice.org.uk/CG127

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On-line Extra:

Nifedipine does not appear on the main chart because it is not regularly used for hypertensive urgencies. The immediate release formulation has been associated with increased MI, stroke & mortality risk. This treatment option is still considered for certain indications in low risk populations (e.g. severe hypertension (>160mmHg systolic or ≥110mmHg diastolic) in pregnancy). For this reason, specific information has been included in this on-line extra. However, this agent should not be routinely used.

**HYPERTENSIVE URGENCY IN PREGNANCY**

Other sources should be sought for discussion of this area. Concerns have been raised regarding the fetus. If pre-eclampsia or eclampsia, successful delivery is of primary importance.

Labetalol & hydralazine IV are also treatment options (see RxFiles Peri-Pregnancy Drug Treatment Considerations Chart p91a-b)

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**REFERENCES:**