Healthy living habits during childhood will pay dividends in later life. Hypertension in particular lends itself to community-based programmes aimed at holding blood pressure down to a desirable level.

by Silas R. A. Dodu

High blood pressure—a major cause of death and sickness in many parts of the world—tends to be thought of as a condition of middle-aged and older people. But, there is growing evidence that it is the result of a process that starts early in life.

A study group of experts meeting at WHO’s invitation has recommended that, in populations where hypertension is seen as a public health problem, the community itself should devise programmes for young people as well as old. These community programmes should be based on four sensible precepts:

- It’s unwise to over-eat; a healthy body weight is maintained with in-takes of “total energy” that are not in excess of the body’s needs.
- It’s unwise to add too much salt to your food. In most parts of the

* The poet William Wordsworth used this paradox to suggest that the experiences of childhood are reflected in the child’s future life as an adult; the same can be said of a healthy childhood.
world, the diet already contains more salt than our body needs, and the amount can be reduced without harm.

- It's unwise to drink alcohol; high alcohol intake is associated with increased risk of hypertension.
- Keep fit with regular physical activity. This need not entail elaborate equipment; taking regular walks can provide healthy levels of physical activity.

The study group's report ("Blood pressure studies in children", WHO's Technical Report Series No. 715) points out that studies in children offer a unique opportunity to investigate factors that contribute to high blood pressure. And they suggest ways of preventing hypertension before its harmful effects are felt later in life.

One section of the report deals with primary prevention of hypertension. The study group felt that preventive activities in childhood should be consistent with those appropriate for adults, and that they should focus primarily on the population as a whole. This community approach involves more than just the health professions; teachers and other professionals, who work with children also have an important part to play. Among the measures that might be taken, the report mentions action through legislation, for instance to bring about a reduction in the sodium content of commercially marketed food items, such as baby food.

The report went on: "The prevention of high blood pressure in childhood and adolescence is, above all, aimed at the prevention of hypertension later in life. Preventive measures begun in adulthood are also part of the strategy of prevention, but the chances are that the earlier prevention starts, the more likely it is to be effective. Moreover, the habits that are related to an undue rise in blood pressure with age are formed early and become increasingly difficult to change later in life."

It is rather difficult to adopt an "individual approach" since it is impossible to identify with precision those children or adolescents who will become hypertensive later in life. So a "community approach" seems prefer-

High blood pressure: Not just an adult condition.

Photo: WHO/Henning Christoph
Salt is suspect

Every human being needs salt (sodium chloride) because of the sodium it contains. The amount of salt needed to provide the body’s requirement of sodium is less than 3 grams per day. However in many societies today, people eat 6-18 grams of salt every day; ten grams would be about two level teaspoons.

Reducing salt intake towards an average of five grams a day would probably result in a lower incidence of hypertension—high blood pressure. This would be a simple matter if all the salt we eat were added in the kitchen or at the dining table. In fact in most communities with a well-varied diet, up to 80 per cent of the salt we consume is already present in the food we buy at the baker’s or butcher’s shop or from the market-stall or catering establishment.

But we can do something about that other 20 per cent. Using less salt in cooking and adding no salt at table might make that little difference to the blood pressure. People who have tried this say they taste the real flavour of the food rather better than when it is swamped by over-use of the salt-pot. (One dietary study in Australia found that six out of ten people salted their food at table before they had even tasted it!)

Another element which is essential for survival and which plays a role in maintaining normal blood pressure is potassium. Fruits and vegetables provide a rich natural source of potassium and are an important part of every healthy diet. A table showing the sodium and potassium contents of selected foods appears in a WHO manual entitled “Management of arterial hypertension,” a practical guide for physicians and other health workers (price 11 Swiss francs).

Salt: The body needs less than 3 grams daily.

Photo: WHO