



GOING TOO LOW

Low blood pressure can be harmless enough to remain untreated, or serious enough to require constant medical aid

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Four years ago, nine days of uninterrupted revelry during the festival of Navratri had left 45-year-old Anjali Bhatt enervated. The celebrations, she thought, justified her languid state, and the accountant concluded that some sleep would undo the damage. "I slipped into unconsciousness during my sleep and woke up to the worried faces of my family members as they revived me," she says. Bhatt's blood pressure had dropped to such an extent that her heart rate slowed down significantly. She had to be hospitalised for a couple of days before getting the nod to return home. "It's like hearing the heart becomes increasingly difficult when you're dealing with the issue of low blood pressure. Despite being on medication, I often find my pressure dropping to an 85 mm of mercury," she says.

Dr Maya Lulla, obstetrician and gynaecologist at Nanavati Hospital, explains that low blood pressure, when caused by heat-induced dehydration, can often be treated with rest and sufficient hydration. The medical condition isn't always frightening. "Light-headedness, dizziness or confusion can be signs of a low BP and indicates that enough blood isn't reaching vital organs like the brain. This leads to a state of shock which can be fatal," she says, adding that a loss in neuromuscular coordination, seizures due to the lack of oxygen in the brain, and chronic spells of exhaustion are repercussions of the condition, which needs medical attention.

SIGNS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Weakness, Bhatt says, is a key sign that signals a drop in her BP and calls for attention. Homemaker Aarti Tejuja, on the other hand, speaks about feeling sharp, jabbing pains spread around her upper back and neck in the hours that led to what she describes as her "sore" attack of low BP yet — one that took her three days to recuperate from. "These are multiple symptoms that can indicate a drop in one's blood pressure, but not everyone experiences the same signs," informs Dr Lulla. "Having the basic symptoms such as dizziness and an aversion to heat, a number of other signs, including breathlessness, indigestion, nausea and vomiting, and an increase in one's pulse rate, when experienced independently, can be indicative of low BP."

Dr Lulla adds that a number of individuals living with low blood pressure might even be oblivious to their condition, often leading perfectly normal lives. Asymptomatic hypotension, she says, may not even need attention. "And while some patients may require constant attention to keep the condition from progressing into a fatal one, others may barely find the need for a second consultation."



CAUSES OF LOW BP

A drop in one's blood pressure, says Dr Lulla, could be triggered by reasons other than medical conditions. "While heat strokes, dehydration, diabetes, pregnancy, epilepsy and gastroenteritis can lead to low blood pressure, psychological factors like fear, anxiety and stress too can trigger the condition," she says. Dr Anupa Hinduja, a general practitioner, explains that the most common type of low blood pressure is orthostatic hypotension. "This is when a person's pressure drops when they stand or sit up abruptly. This is linked to your posture," she says.

HOW LOW IS TOO LOW

A regular blood pressure reading, says Dr Lulla, is 120/80 mm of mercury, where 120 indicates the systolic pressure (pressure felt against the walls of the arteries when the heart pumps the blood), and 80 signifies the diastolic pressure (pressure felt against the walls of the arteries when the heart relaxes). "Athletic individuals or those who are normally active may have a pressure of 110/70, which can be indicative of a healthy body. A patient only suffers from hypotension when his/her systolic or diastolic pressure falls below 90 or 60 respectively," she says, pointing out that the readings must be consistently low over a defined time period for the condition to be termed as hypotension.

TREATING THE CONDITION

Treatment for low blood pressure is always dependent on the cause. If it's caused due to dehydration, homemade drinks or ready-made

sachets of electoral are prescribed. Dr Lulla adds that while staying hydrated and including good amounts of sugar and salt in the diet, unless prescribed otherwise, can help keep hypotension under check, a specific treatment plan can only be drafted after analysing the cause behind the dropping pressure, and a person's medical history. "Salted drinks can help restore an electrolyte imbalance in an individual, while diabetics may need to eat sugar to maintain glucose levels. In case the condition has been triggered by the loss of blood, restoring the blood and monitoring the patient is the effective treatment for hypotension. A drop in blood pressure caused due to a septic shock needs to be treated with antibiotics," she informs.

Tejuja informs that having frequent meals helps keep the pressure from abruptly dropping during the day. She adds that a person recovering from hypotension must place a rolled towel under the neck and lie flat on the bed without a pillow. "This position restores the blood flow towards the head instead of allowing it to pool at the feet," she informs. Caffeinated beverages like coffee may also help in boosting the pressure temporarily. Dr Anupa Hinduja adds that the medication for low blood pressure are usually given as a last resort when a patient doesn't respond to salt and water intake, since they tighten the blood vessels. "This, in turn, causes headaches and other problems," she says. "Hypertension usually occurs as a secondary condition to a primary problem, which gets resolved when the latter is efficiently treated."