

WHAT IS PULMONARY HYPERTENSION?

Pulmonary Hypertension is the medical term for a disease process which takes place in the small blood vessels in the lungs. It is a disease that can affect males and females of all ages and ethnic backgrounds but is more commonly presented in adulthood. The disease process that causes Pulmonary Hypertension occurs over several years and results in the progressive obstruction of blood flow through the lungs. As a result, the pressure in the pulmonary arteries increases. The heart must pump against this increased pressure to maintain blood flow in the lungs and, to the rest of the body. Over time, this can affect the heart's ability to work effectively and may eventually lead to heart failure.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

The early signs include:

- Fatigue (feeling tired all the time)
- Shortness of Breath (during exertion or everyday activities)
- Build up of fluid in the limbs
- Dizziness (during exertion)

Often people don't take much notice of the early signs of Pulmonary Hypertension because they think its just being over-tired, lack of fitness or the process of getting old.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Blood tests and a physical examination may be conducted. The doctor will ask questions to gain a clear and detailed history of all prior and current medical conditions, and those of close family members. A history of exposure to drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine, alcohol leading to cirrhosis, and tobacco leading to emphysema are considered significant.

Diagnosis usually results from ruling out the presence of other diseases which may have similar symptoms to Pulmonary Hypertension.

An echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart) is required and if there is a suggestion of Pulmonary Hypertension, other tests including breathing tests and walking tests, CT scans and a right heart catheter are also required.

Pulmonary Hypertension has a grading system which classes Pulmonary Hypertension based upon the extent of functional limitations caused by symptoms. Class I describes individuals with Pulmonary Hypertension who experience no limitation in daily function, progressing to class IV in which individuals are unable to perform any physical activity and have symptoms at rest, indicating more severe Pulmonary Hypertension.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

There are now several good treatments available for patients with Pulmonary Hypertension. These treatments vary from tablets to nebulisers and for individuals with very severe Pulmonary Hypertension, continuous intravenous infusion therapy is available.

Most individuals with Pulmonary Hypertension do very well with this treatment but occasionally and only if these treatments are ineffective, more involved treatments including lung transplantation may need to be considered.