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FEBRUARY IS HEART &

Control Your Blood Pressure, Reduce Heart and Stroke Risk

Canadians silence the "silent killer"? That's how high blood pressure has been described, and according to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, it can double or even triple your risk of heart disease and stroke. Research is the key to deepening the understanding of high blood pressure and finding new, "made-in-Canada" treatment strategies, says the Foundation, which is why it has awarded \$6.4 million to blood pressure related grants over the next four years.

As many as one in five Canadians – and about half of people over 65 – have high blood pressure. According to a recent Heart and Stroke Foundation survey, three-quarters of people polled knew that high blood pressure is a warning of other diseases. Yet slightly less than half of adult Canadians understand that medication can usually control high blood pressure. And only a quarter know high blood pressure can sometimes be controlled by lifestyle changes, without medication.

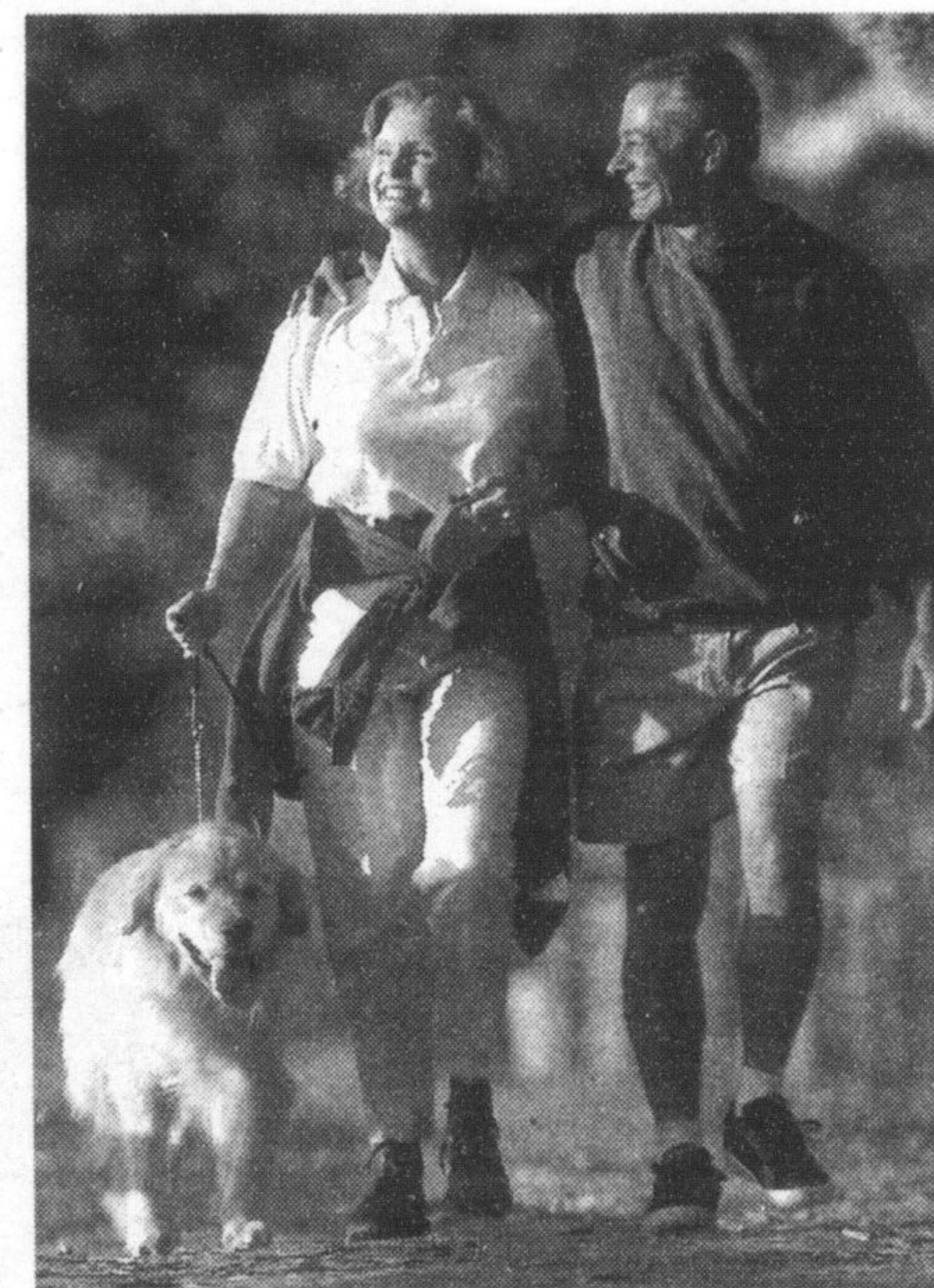
"In fact, by taking action you can keep your blood pressure in a healthy range," says Dr. Anthony Graham, spokesperson, Heart and Stroke Foundation. "The good news is that with proper treatment to control high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke risk can be reduced by as much as 70%."

The "silent killer" profile

The muscles that line the walls of our blood vessels regulate blood flow and its pressure. When these muscles contract, blood pressure rises, because the same amount of blood has to flow through a narrower space. Blood pressure changes throughout the day to meet the body's demands for blood. But in some people, their blood pressure remains consistently higher than it should. Over time, that excess pressure damages the blood vessels and causes additional complications.

The only way to know if you have high blood pressure is to get it checked by a healthcare professional at least once every two years. You can also visit www.heartand-stroke.ca/bloodpressure to take a risk assessment test for heart disease and stroke. You'll get a personal risk profile and a customized blood pressure action plan. Here's what you can do to reduce your blood pressure:

- Maintain a healthy weight. If you're overweight (excessive weight is a particular risk if it's stored around the abdomen), losing even a modest amount can help lower your blood pressure.
- Reduce the fat and salt in your diet. Try to lessen your consumption of foods with added salt. Many convenience and snack foods, smoked, salted, cured or canned meats and fish are high in salt.
- Eat potassium-rich foods. While sodium tends to raise blood pressure, potassium helps bring it down. Good sources of potassium include all fruits and vegetables, especially bananas, oranges, melons, kiwi fruit and tomatoes.
- Become smoke-free. Smoking adds to the buildup of plaque in your arteries and nicotine raises your blood pressure. At least one-quarter of the deaths in Canada from heart attacks and strokes are due to smoking.
- Get physically active. Check with your doctor first if you haven't been active for a while.
- Limit alcohol intake to no more than two drinks a day; to a weekly maximum of 14 drinks for men and nine drinks for women.
- Take time to relax. Repeated exposure to stress may not only raise blood pressure levels, but also contributes to unhealthy lifestyle choices, such as overeating, smoking and drinking.



Aside from making changes to your lifestyle, your doctor may also want to control your high blood pressure through medication. It's important to take any medication regularly, in the amount prescribed. Never increase your dose yourself, skip your medication, or "double up" your dosage if you miss a few days or don't feel well.

"Because high blood pressure is silent, how you feel isn't a good indication of whether you need your medication" says Dr. Graham. "And don't stop taking your medication once your blood pressure becomes normal. You must continue to take it to keep your blood pressure under control."

"There is no cure, but treatment can effectively manage and reduce the risks. With the right plan," adds Dr. Graham, "you can manage your blood pressure to help you live a longer, healthier life."

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