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Speaking up about 'the silent killer'

Ihab Shaarawy

NEWS of the death of Egyptian actor Wael Nour shocked his fans. The 55-year-old film star had seemed to them in good shape and still eligible to play the character role of the funny, energetic man he had so often played.

Nour died in his home in Alexandria of a heart attack that, according to the Ministry of Health, was due to hypertension caused by his smoking habit.

And hypertension caused by smoking, according to health experts, is what affects nearly 16 million Egyptians.

"High blood pressure, or the silent killer, has become one of the main causes of death throughout the world, not only in Egypt," said Dr Mohamed Ibrahim, a cardiologist.

The situation in Egypt, the doctor insists, is even more complicated than elsewhere due to unhealthy lifestyle habits and an increasing number of hypertension patients, who may also have diabetes or other health problems.

According to statistics published by the World Health Organisation in 2014, high blood pressure was the fourth reason for death in Egypt, responsible as it is for 4.6 per cent of the annual deaths. This percentage has put Egypt in the 13th position on the chart for the most affected countries.

Heavy smoking was one factor that led to Nour's sudden death. Millions of Egyptians are heavy smokers too.

Smoking "is truly one of the worst, if not the worst, risk factor because it has an impact on so many things," said Dr Ibrahim to *The Egyptian Gazette*. "It injures the arteries, contributes to cholesterol problems, and raises the risk of blood clots."

With 29 per cent of the world's adult population projected to have hypertension by the year 2025, prevention and management of hypertension have become a public health priority.

Hypertension, is also referred to as high blood pressure. And when the arteries have persistent high blood pressure, the heart has to work harder than normal to pump blood through the vessels. And this leads, eventually, to heart disease.

You can have high blood pressure for years without any symptoms. But even without symptoms, damage to blood vessels and your heart continues and can be detected. Uncontrolled high blood pressure increases your risk of heart attack and stroke.

A few people with high blood pressure may have headaches, shortness of breath or nosebleeds, but these signs and symptoms are not specific and usually don't occur until high blood pressure has reached a severe or life-threatening stage.

For most adults, there is no identifiable cause of high blood pressure. This type of high blood pressure, called primary (essential) hypertension, tends to develop gradually over many years.

There are many risk factors connected to the disease, however, including being overweight, using tobacco, not being active and eating too much salt.

Studies have also found that high levels of stress can lead to a temporary increase in blood pressure. Trying to relax by eating more, smoking or drinking alcohol, may only increase problems with high blood pressure. High blood pressure can be controlled with medication. Losing weight, becoming more active, eating less salt, and drinking less alcohol, can all help to lower blood pressure.

But one of the greatest problems in this regard in Egypt is the lack of awareness about the silent killer. Many of those affected are unaware of the disease, as the only way to find out if you have it is by having your blood pressure measured.

"I think it's time for Nour's colleagues to spread awareness through their art work, especially on TV and in the cinema.

"Scenes of smoking and drinking alcohol should disappear from screens. Spreading tips about a healthy lifestyle should be on the agenda of Cinema and TV producers," Dr Ibrahim said.