

What You Can Do To Lower Your Blood Pressure

What Is High Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of arteries (vessels that carry blood away from your heart). It's normal for your blood pressure to go up and down throughout the day. If your blood pressure stays elevated over time then you have high blood pressure, or *hypertension*. High blood pressure makes your heart work too hard and if not controlled can eventually lead to other conditions like heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, and blindness.

For most patients, blood pressure is considered high if the level is at or above 140/90 mmHg. If your pressure is between 120/80 mmHg and 139/89 mmHg, then you have *prehypertension*. Patients with prehypertension don't have high blood pressure, but could easily develop it if certain lifestyle changes are not made.

Maintaining a Healthy Weight

Being overweight increases your risk of developing high blood pressure. Losing even ten pounds can help lower your blood pressure. The best formula for losing weight is a combination of eating less and becoming more active. Calorie-saving tips include eating smaller portions, using lowfat or nonfat products, and limiting sugar intake.

Make sure you get 30 minutes of moderate-level physical activity on most days of the week to prevent or control high blood pressure. Types of moderate-level physical activity include brisk walking, bicycling, raking leaves, and gardening. You should check with your healthcare professional before becoming more physically active if you have heart trouble or have had a heart attack, if you're over age 50 and are not used to moderate-level physical activity, if you have a family history of heart disease at an early age, or if you have any other serious health problem.

Follow a Healthy Eating Plan

You can reduce your blood pressure by eating foods that are low in saturated fat, total fat, and cholesterol, and high in fruits, vegetables and lowfat dairy foods. A good overall eating plan to consider is DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension). The DASH eating plan includes whole grains, poultry, fish, and nuts, and has low amounts of fats, red meats, sweets, and sugared

beverages. It is also high in potassium, calcium, and magnesium, as well as protein and fiber. The DASH eating plan does increase your fiber intake, so you might initially experience bloating and diarrhea. To get used to the DASH way of eating, gradually increase your daily servings of fruits, vegetables, and grains.

Reduce Sodium in Your Diet

Using less sodium is key to keeping blood pressure at a healthy level. Most Americans should consume no more than 2.4 grams of sodium a day (that equals about one teaspoon of table salt a day). If you already have high blood pressure your healthcare professional may advise you to consume even less sodium.

Salt substitutes are available, but before you use them check with your healthcare professional. Salt substitutes contain potassium chloride and may be harmful for those with certain conditions or who are taking certain medications. Often just using herbs, spices, garlic, and onions can make your food spicy without salt and sodium.

Drink Alcohol Only In Moderation

Drinking too much alcohol can raise blood pressure (and also harm the liver, brain, and heart). Alcohol is also high in calories, which can block your efforts to lose weight. If you drink alcoholic beverages, drink only a moderate amount; one drink a day for women or two drinks a day for men. Depending on your health condition and your medications, your healthcare professional might advise you to avoid alcohol altogether.

You Can Do It

Developing a healthy lifestyle will help you prevent high blood pressure. If you already have high blood pressure and are taking medication, you should still make lifestyle changes. Doing so will help your medications work better and may reduce the amount you need. Changing eating habits and activity levels always seem difficult at first, but "you can do it."

This patient handout was adapted from the National Institutes of Health brochure, "Your Guide to Lowering Blood Pressure." The full guide can be accessed by going to www.nhlbi.nih.gov or by calling 301-592-8573. Ask for publication No. 03-5232.