High Blood Pressure

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How High Blood Pressure Harms Your Body

If you have high blood pressure, it's critical that you follow your prescribed treatment plan. Here's why.

If you're among the one in three Americans who have high blood pressure (hypertension), take note: it's not something you can afford to ignore.

High blood pressure typically has no symptoms. Since symptoms can be strong motivators, it can be tough to make lifestyle changes or see the need for treatment when you feel fine. But here's why you need to follow "doctor's orders." High blood pressure is a "silent killer" and not treating it can have serious consequences.

What high blood pressure does to your body

Blood pressure is the force of blood that travels through your arteries. If pressure is too high, it can damage your blood vessels and organs in your body. The higher your blood pressure is, and the longer it stays untreated, the greater your risk for serious medical problems, including:

Heart failure

High blood pressure puts extra demand on the heart. Over time, the heart grows bigger to make up for the extra work and it eventually weakens. Heart failure occurs when the weakened heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. High blood pressure is the biggest predictor of heart failure. One study found that 90 percent of people with heart failure had high blood pressure.

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How High Blood Pressure Harms Your Body *(continued)*

Heart attack

High blood pressure can damage the arteries that carry blood and oxygen to the heart muscle. If these vessels become narrowed and damaged, a blood clot can form and lead to a heart attack.

Stroke

The biggest risk factor for stroke is high blood pressure. High blood pressure can damage arteries that supply blood to the brain. A clot can form and block the artery and prevent blood flow to the brain, causing a stroke. High blood pressure can also cause arteries in the brain to burst. This also results in another type of stroke called hemorrhagic or bleeding stroke.

Kidney damage

High blood pressure can damage the arteries that supply the kidneys. This leads to kidney damage and kidney failure. This is especially dangerous because kidney damage raises blood pressure even more.

Vision problems

High blood pressure can damage the blood vessels that supply the eye. The blood vessels can burst or bleed, causing blurry vision and blindness.

Memory loss

High blood pressure can restrict blood flow to the brain. If too little blood reaches the brain, the brain cannot work well. One study found that this may lead to memory loss.

How to reduce your risk

To prevent complications, follow your high blood pressure treatment plan as directed by your doctor:

Take all medications as prescribed

Never stop taking a medicine without talking to your doctor first. Blood pressure medication can cut your risk of heart failure and other complications in half.

Reach or maintain a healthy weight

If you are overweight, lose weight. A weight loss of just 10 pounds can help lower blood pressure.

Follow the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet

Studies show that the DASH diet helps control high blood pressure. The diet is rich in vegetables, fruit and low-fat dairy. Foods high in saturated and total fat and cholesterol are limited.

Limit sodium (salt) intake

Eating a diet low in salt can help keep your blood pressure in check. Keep sodium intake to less than 2,400 mg per day.

Get active

Work up to 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week. Check with your doctor before you start or increase your level of exercise.

Avoid alcohol

Drinking too much or too often raises the risk for high blood pressure.

Don’t smoke

If you do, quit.

5 Ways to Lower Your Blood Pressure Without Medication

Hypertension strikes one in three American adults. Learn the top lifestyle strategies that can make a real impact on lowering your blood pressure.

About one in every three American adults has hypertension, or high blood pressure. Medication is often prescribed, but that's not the only solution. There are many lifestyle strategies that have also been shown to have an impact. For some, weight loss combined with exercise and a healthy eating plan may even reduce or eliminate the need for medication altogether.

Your doctor can help you decide whether to take a combined approach (medication plus lifestyle) or whether to try following these healthy lifestyle strategies first:

1. Increase exercise

Aerobic exercise can lower blood pressure and can also help with weight loss. It doesn't take a time-consuming workout in a gym to reap the benefits, either.

- As few as 30 minutes of moderate exercise on most days of the week has been shown to be effective.
- Aerobic activities such as walking, biking, swimming and water aerobics often produce the best results.
- Before you start an exercise program, ask your doctor what type and amount of exercise is right for you.

2. Cut your salt intake

One teaspoon (2,400 mg) is the maximum recommended daily amount. Reducing this to two thirds of a teaspoon (1,500 mg) can make a big difference.

- Check labels of food and over-the-counter medication for their sodium content.
- Use herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods.
- Avoid processed foods such as canned and frozen ready-to-eat foods, cheeses and luncheon meats.

3. Eat a healthy diet

Follow the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) guidelines. This has been shown to lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure, even without other interventions.

- The DASH diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products. It restricts intake of saturated fats, red meat and sugar.
- The increased fiber, potassium, calcium and magnesium from these foods are all thought to play a role in reducing blood pressure.

4. Lose weight

For every two pounds of weight loss, you can lower your systolic pressure by one point and your diastolic pressure by 1.4 points.

- Gradual weight loss of one to two pounds per week is most effective.
- Keep a food journal to track exactly what and how much you eat.
- Choose foods low in saturated fat, cholesterol, trans fats and refined sugar.
- Watch your portion sizes.
- Do not skip meals. Eating three meals a day plus snacks is essential in weight management.
- Aim for 25 to 30 grams of fiber daily, which will fill you up and curb your hunger.

5 Ways to Lower Your Blood Pressure Without Medication *(continued)*

5. Limit alcohol

Drinking a lot of alcohol can raise blood pressure.

- This means no more than one drink a day for women, two drinks for men.
- One drink is the equivalent of 12 ounces of beer, five ounces of wine or two ounces of hard liquor.

You can also help yourself to relax and cope better with stress from your busy life with these techniques:

Simplify

Try to cut out activities that eat up your time but deliver little value. Learn to say "no." Clean out your house, car and garage of things that you no longer need. Let go of relationships that complicate your life more than they add.

Take a deep breath

Making a conscious effort to deepen and slow down your breathing can help you relax.

Exercise

Physical activity is a natural stress-buster.

Get plenty of sleep

Being sleep-deprived can make your problems seem bigger than they really are.

The key is to discover what works for you. Choose your strategies, take action and start enjoying the benefits. You can lower your blood pressure and help prevent other chronic diseases at the same time.

DASH to Lower Blood Pressure

What you eat has a lot to do with good blood pressure control. Find out what delicious foods to include in your diet to help combat high blood pressure.

Want to lower your blood pressure? Try the DASH eating plan, short for **Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension**.

If your first thought is that the DASH is bland and boring, think again. The DASH is as much about adding tasty, nutrient-rich foods as it is about limiting fats and sugars.

What the studies say

Two large studies, both supported by the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, have offered proof that DASH works.

The first study looked at the effects on blood pressure of eating a varied, wholesome diet versus the typical American diet.

- Results showed that blood pressure could be lowered by eating combinations of healthy foods, such as fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products, as opposed to the typical American diet.

DASH to Lower Blood Pressure *(continued)*

- DASH eaters also ate reduced amounts of fats, red meats, sweets and sugared beverages.
- Noteworthy is that blood pressures were reduced on the DASH, even though this first study did *not* restrict sodium intake.

The second study then looked at the added effect of a reduced sodium intake on blood pressure as people followed either the DASH eating plan or a typical American diet.

- Results showed that reducing sodium lowered blood pressure even further for those already on the DASH eating plan. It also lowered pressures for those on the typical American diet.
- The biggest benefits were seen in people on the DASH eating plan who also lowered their sodium intake.

How the DASH works

Experts believe the DASH works for these reasons:

- By choosing fruits and vegetables, you're more likely to cut out high-sodium, processed foods.
- The DASH diet is rich in calcium, potassium, fiber and magnesium. A lack of these nutrients is linked to high blood pressure.
- DASH is low in saturated and trans fats, which are known to raise blood pressure.
- Instead of supplements, the DASH focuses on combinations of healthy foods, which work together in your body to help lower blood pressure.

So what exactly IS the DASH eating plan?

Specifically, it includes the following:

Daily servings:

- Seven to eight servings of grains, from mostly whole grains
- Four to five servings of vegetables
- Four to five servings of fruit
- Two to three servings of low-fat dairy foods
- No more than two servings of lean meat, poultry and fish
- Two to three servings of fats and oils

Weekly servings:

- Four to five servings of nuts, seeds and dry beans
- No more than five servings of sweets

Fitting the DASH into your lifestyle

You can work these DASH nutrient-foods into your meal plan in these ways:

Up your vegetable intake

- Add a variety of veggies to lunch or dinnertime salads and soups.
- Have cut-up veggies such as carrots, colored peppers, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and celery for snacks, with a low-fat yogurt dip.
- Increase vegetable portions of casseroles and stir-fries while decreasing meat portions.
- Add beans/legumes to salads, soups and casseroles.

Go whole-grain

- Choose whole-grain breads, cereals and pastas.
- Instead of white rice or potatoes, experiment with brown rice, quinoa, barley and bulgur.

Go nutty

- Sprinkle nuts into whole-grain cereal, yogurt or salads.
- Add natural peanut or almond butter to whole-grain bread with sliced banana.
- Snack on small amounts of nuts and dried fruit.

Do it with dairy

- Use skim or low-fat milk in smoothies with fresh fruit and 100 percent juice.
- Add skim or low-fat milk to coffee for lattes.
- Choose low-fat yogurt for breakfast or snacks.
- Use low-fat cheese on whole-grain bread, sprinkled on salads, or topped on a baked potato with broccoli.

DASH isn't just for people with high blood pressure. It's an overall healthy, wholesome, high-fiber eating plan that can also help reduce cholesterol levels and aid in weight loss.

10 Questions (and Answers) About Monitoring Your Blood Pressure at Home

Here are some tips for checking your blood pressure at home.

1. Why might it be useful to monitor my blood pressure at home?

If your doctor has suggested you monitor your blood pressure at home, he or she likely wants to keep a close eye on it. High blood pressure, or hypertension, can cause serious damage to your body. It puts you at risk of heart attack, stroke and kidney failure – and that's just the short list. Controlling your blood pressure is important, and the only way to know whether it is high is to measure it.

2. Why not just check it when I'm at the doctor's office?

Convenience is one reason. It is easier for you to monitor it at home than it is for you to make frequent trips to your doctor's office. Another reason is that your blood pressure rises and falls throughout the day, every day. So a reading taken at a doctor's office may not be typical of your normal blood pressure. Also, a visit to the doctor's office may cause some people's blood pressure to rise – a condition called "white coat hypertension." Monitoring your blood pressure at home can give you a better idea of your status.

3. Are there some people for whom home monitoring may be especially useful?

Yes. The list includes:

- People whose high blood pressure was recently diagnosed. By checking their blood pressure regularly at home, they can see how their treatment is working.
- People with health conditions that require close monitoring of blood pressure, such as those who have diabetes, heart disease or kidney disease.
- Pregnant women who may be at risk for a serious condition called preeclampsia, or hypertension caused by pregnancy.
- Older adults who may be more prone to white coat hypertension.

4. Where can I buy a home blood pressure monitor?

You can find them at discount drugstores and pharmacies, among other places.

5. How do I know what type is best for me?

Talk with your doctor before you buy a home blood pressure monitor. You also may want to ask a pharmacist to help you choose a model at the store.

10 Questions (and Answers) About Monitoring Your Blood Pressure at Home *(continued)*

6. Is there anything I should look for on the label?

Look for a monitor that is certified to meet international standards. If you are pregnant or overweight, you may want to buy one that is approved for your condition.

7. How can I be sure I am using my monitor correctly?

It is a good idea to take your new monitor to your doctor's office. Your doctor can check the machine for accuracy and show you how to use it correctly.

8. How can I help ensure accurate readings?

Don't smoke, drink caffeinated beverages or exercise 30 minutes before you take a reading. These things can raise your blood pressure. Also always follow all the instructions that come with the unit.

9. How often should I check my blood pressure?

Talk with your doctor. Sometimes once a day or once a week is enough. Or your doctor may want several readings throughout the day to be sure your blood pressure is under control all day long.

10. Do I still need to go to my doctor's office?

Yes. Checking your blood pressure at home is not a substitute for regular doctor visits. Keep all of your appointments, especially if you are under treatment for high blood pressure, diabetes or heart or kidney disease. Even if your blood pressure readings are normal at home, it's still important to visit your doctor. Take a record of your blood pressure readings with you to each appointment.

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UHCEW512938-000