

Diet and blood pressure

What is High Blood Pressure or Hypertension?

Blood pressure is the force of blood against artery walls. It is recorded as two numbers: the systolic records the pressure when the heart beats and the diastolic when the heart is at rest between beats. Both numbers are important.

Normal blood pressure is considered to be a systolic between 110 and 130 and a diastolic between 85 and 60. Blood pressure is measured in millimetres of mercury, which is written down as: mmHg. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is diagnosed when several readings show your systolic pressure is 140 or above, or your diastolic is 90 or above, or both.

Blood pressure is extremely variable and may easily be elevated by stress, emotional state, physical activity and even "a visit to the doctors".

Why is high blood pressure (hypertension) dangerous?

Poorly controlled hypertension increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke as well as kidney and eye damage.

If your blood pressure is too high your GP will prescribe medication and review this regularly. However simple changes to your diet and lifestyle can also be a very effective part of treatment.

The most important diet and lifestyle measures you can take are:

- Keeping your weight down. If you are overweight losing just 5-10% of your starting weight will help
- Be more physically active. Aim for 30 minutes or more, most days of the week
- If you drink alcohol, only drink in moderation (see box)
- Diet: Follow the eating plan opposite. It is based on research findings which show that a diet low in saturated fat and salt and high in fruit and vegetables, wholegrain foods, and dairy foods can significantly lower blood pressure within two weeks. It is rich in nutrients such as potassium, calcium, magnesium and fibre

Changing your diet and lifestyle in this way can help to achieve a significant drop in your blood pressure levels, whether or not you are taking tablets.

If you take medication to control high blood pressure, continue to take it as prescribed by your doctor.

Aim for 4-5 portions of vegetables daily

- 1 portion = 3 heaped tablespoons of vegetables or beans
 - 1 small bowl of salad
 - 150ml vegetable juice

(if using canned vegetables, look out for lower salt varieties)

Aim for 4-5 portions of fruits daily

- 1 portion = 1 medium fruit (bananas, apples, oranges)
- 2 small fruits (plums, satsumas, kiwi fruit)
- 1 handful very small fruit (grapes, strawberries, cherries)
- 1 slice of a large fruit (melon, pineapple) or ½ grapefruit
- 1 tablespoon dried fruit
- 3 heaped tablespoons stewed or canned fruit
- 150 ml fruit juice or fruit smoothie

Aim for 2-3 portions of low fat dairy foods daily

- 1 portion = 1 glass skimmed/semi skimmed milk
- 1 small carton low fat yoghurt
- 1½ ozs reduced fat cheese

Reduce your intake of salt to less than 6g per day

Three quarters of the salt we eat is hidden in manufactured foods, ready meals and takeaways, so it will help if you eat less of these (see our factsheet on salt). As a guideline, less than 0.3g salt (0.1g sodium) per 100g of food is "a little" and over 1.5g salt (0.6g sodium) per 100g is "a lot"

Increase fibre intake

Include a wide variety of high fibre foods e.g. beans, pulses, nuts, and wholegrains including breakfast cereals, brown pasta and wholegrain bread. Aim for 3 servings each day.

Oily fish

Include at least 1-2 portions per week. Examples include salmon, pilchards, sardines, mackerel, herring and trout. Fresh, frozen or canned are all good, but avoid fish canned in brine.

Alcohol in moderation

- Limit alcohol to no more than 1-2 drinks (2-3 units) for men and 1 drink (1-2 units) for women each day
- A unit is half a pint of normal strength beer or a pub measure of spirits (25ml)
- A typical 175 ml glass of wine is around 2 units. A 330 ml bottle of lager or alcopop is around 1.7 units