
Blood pressure

Summary

- High blood pressure (hypertension) can lead to serious problems such as heart attack, stroke or kidney disease.
 - High blood pressure usually does not have any symptoms, so it is important to have your blood pressure checked regularly by your doctor.
 - Lifestyle changes are very important in managing high blood pressure. Ask your doctor for advice.
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Blood pressure is the pressure of the blood in the arteries as it is pumped around the body by the heart. Blood pressure does not stay the same all the time. It changes to meet your body's needs. It is affected by various factors, including body position, breathing, emotional state, exercise and sleep.

If blood pressure remains high, it can lead to serious problems like heart attack, stroke, heart failure or kidney disease. The medical name for persistently high blood pressure is **hypertension** and the medical name for low blood pressure is **hypotension**.

Measuring blood pressure

Blood pressure is usually measured by wrapping an inflatable pressure cuff around your upper arm. This cuff is part of a machine called a sphygmomanometer. It is best to measure blood pressure when you are relaxed and sitting.

Blood pressure is recorded as two numbers, such as 120/80. The larger number indicates the pressure in the arteries as the heart pumps out blood during each beat. This is called the systolic blood pressure. The lower number indicates the pressure as the heart relaxes before the next beat. This is called the diastolic blood pressure. Both are measured in units called millimetres of mercury (mmHg).

Variations in blood pressure

Your blood pressure changes to meet your body's needs. If a reading is high, your doctor may measure your blood pressure again on several separate occasions to confirm the level. Your doctor may also recommend that you measure your blood pressure at home or have a 24-hour recording with a monitoring device.

Blood pressure readings

What is considered a healthy blood pressure varies from person to person. Your doctor will advise you about what your ideal blood pressure is based on your circumstances, including your overall health.

The following figures should only be used as a guide:

- optimal – less than 120 / less than 80
- normal – 120 to 129 / 80 to 84
- high-normal – 130 to 139 / 85 to 89
- high blood pressure – greater than 140/90.

High blood pressure usually does not give warning signs. You can have high blood pressure and feel perfectly well. The only way to find out if your blood pressure is high is to have it checked regularly by your doctor.

Low blood pressure is relative – what is low for one person may be okay for another – and is only considered a problem if it has a **negative impact on your body or it affects the way you feel**.

Regular blood-pressure checks

If your blood pressure is in the healthy range and you have no other **risk factors for cardiovascular disease**, and no personal or family history of high blood pressure, it is still important to have a check every two years and during routine visits to your doctor.

If your blood pressure is 'high-normal' (or higher), or if you have other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as a personal or family history of high blood pressure, stroke or heart attack, it is best to have it checked more frequently. Ask your doctor for advice.

Managing high blood pressure

If your blood pressure remains high, it can lead to serious health problems. You will be more at risk of these problems if you:

- have unhealthy eating habits
- are overweight or obese
- are physically inactive
- smoke
- have high cholesterol
- have diabetes
- are socially isolated
- have depression.

Lifestyle changes are very important to help manage high blood pressure and lower your risk of cardiovascular disease. Suggestions include:

- Enjoy a wide variety of foods from the five food groups.
- Decrease your salt (sodium) intake. (Salt is a mineral and is made up of sodium and chloride, but it's the sodium in salt that is bad for your health. Although health professionals talk about salt, it is the sodium that is listed on food labels in supermarkets that it is important to keep track of.)
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- Be moderately physically active for 30 to 45 minutes per day, five days or more in the week. Alternatively you can aim for vigorous activity (activity that makes you huff and puff) for 15 to 30 minutes, five or more days of the week.
- Limit your alcohol intake to no more than two standard drinks on any day.
- **Quit smoking.**

Some people may also need medicine to manage high blood pressure, but it is still important for them to make lifestyle changes too.

High blood pressure and daily activity

Check with your doctor before starting a new activity or increasing your level or intensity. Be active safely. Build up your levels of activity gradually.

Try to do at least 30 to 45 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. This can be done in bouts of 10 minutes or longer, if that is more convenient.

Physical activity is any form of bodily movement performed by our large muscle groups. Moderate-intensity physical activity (energetic activity that doesn't make you overly breathless), such as brisk walking or cycling, is enough to provide health benefits.

Some types of exercises, such as body presses and lifting heavy weights, can actually raise your blood pressure. Avoid these if you have high blood pressure.

High blood pressure and diet

Following a diet that emphasises the intake of vegetables, fruits and whole grains, including low-fat dairy products, such as in the **Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet**, may be combined with exercise and weight loss to maximise blood pressure reduction.

Healthy eating is important in managing high blood pressure and reducing your risk of heart disease. Enjoying a variety of foods from the different food groups is the key to healthy eating. Every day, try to include:

- vegetables
- wholegrains
- lean meats
- oily fish
- fruit
- reduced-fat, low-fat or no-fat dairy products
- monounsaturated or polyunsaturated vegetable and seed oils
- nuts, seeds and legumes.

Salt intake and high blood pressure

Reducing the amount of salt you eat can also help to manage or even avoid high blood pressure. To help reduce your salt intake:

- Ensure your diet consists of wholefoods including, vegetables, fruits, wholegrains, lean meat and poultry, fish and seafood, legumes, nuts and seeds.
- Avoid foods such as pizzas, pastries, biscuits and take away foods as a whole, as they contribute large amounts of sodium to the diet and displace the intake of healthy foods, many of which are naturally low in sodium.
- Choose low-salt or reduced-salt food where available.
- Avoid adding salt to cooking or at the table – flavour meals with herbs and spices instead.

Medications for high blood pressure

There is a large variety of medicines available to lower and manage high blood pressure. Your doctor may call them ‘antihypertensives’.

These medications do not cure high blood pressure, but they do help manage it. Once you start to take medicines to manage your blood pressure, you may need to take them for the rest of your life. However, the dose of these medicines may change over time.

If you need to take medication, your doctor will advise you on the correct type and dose. Two or more different medications are often needed to manage blood pressure.

Make sure that you take your medicines regularly. Some things that may help you remember to take them include:

- taking them at the same time each day
- using a weekly pill box
- marking the time on your calendar
- asking a family member or friend to remind you
- always carrying a list of your medicines and their doses with you
- entering a daily alarm in your mobile phone to remind you.

Take any blood pressure medicine exactly as prescribed. Don't stop or change your medicine, unless your doctor advises you to.

Blood pressure and potassium

Dietary potassium lessens the effect of dietary sodium. This means that **eating foods high in potassium can help most people manage their blood pressure**. This can generally be achieved by eating vegetables, fruits and wholegrains.

However, this recommendation may not apply to some people, such as people whose kidneys don't function normally or who are taking certain medicines. Ask your doctor for more information.

Increasing your dietary potassium is not enough on its own, but in combination with other efforts such as exercising regularly, reducing your sodium intake and developing other healthy eating behaviours, it can help you to manage

your blood pressure.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Your local community health centre
- **Heart Foundation Helpline** Tel. **13 11 12**
- **Quitline** Tel. **13 7848** – for information on quitting smoking
- **Medicines Line (Australia)** Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (**1300 633 424**) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines

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