

Diet and High Blood Pressure

PhysiciansCommittee
for Responsible Medicine



High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is a major risk factor for serious health problems. Nearly half of adults in the United States suffer from high blood pressure.¹ High blood pressure can contribute to heart attacks, heart failure, stroke, and kidney disease. Yet high blood pressure often doesn't have warning signs, which is why it's known as the "silent killer."² It's also why blood pressure should be checked regularly.

Doctors use two measurements to check blood pressure. First is systolic blood pressure, or the top number in a blood pressure reading. This is the pressure in the arteries when the heart contracts. Second is diastolic blood pressure, or the bottom number. This is the pressure in the arteries when the heart relaxes between heartbeats.

Blood Pressure Categories³

Classification	Systolic	Diastolic
Normal	<120	and <80
Elevated	120-129	and <80
Stage 1 Hypertension	130-139	or 80-89
Stage 2 Hypertension	≥140	or ≥90
Hypertensive Crisis*	>180	or >120

*If your blood pressure is in the hypertensive crisis zone, consult your doctor immediately.

Bringing blood pressure under control is very important for good health, and treatment often involves taking medication. However, changes in your diet can both lower blood pressure and reduce your medication needs. Let your doctor know if you plan on making diet changes that could lower your blood pressure.

How Can I Control My Blood Pressure?

Go Plant-Based

Vegans and vegetarians tend to have lower blood pressure and a lower risk of hypertension than omnivores.⁴⁻⁶

A 2014 meta-analysis published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* found that eating a vegetarian diet was associated with significantly lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure compared with eating an omnivorous diet. The reductions seen are comparable to the effects of other lifestyle interventions for high blood pressure—such as eating a low-sodium diet or losing about 10 pounds of body weight—or around half the effect of traditional pharmaceutical therapy.⁴

Plant-based diets are typically low in sodium and high in fruit and vegetables, which are rich in fiber, potassium, and flavonoids. Researchers analyzed the gut health of more than 900 participants and compared intakes of flavonoid-rich foods, such as apples, berries, and pears, with blood pressure levels. Participants with the highest intake of these foods had lower blood pressure compared with those with the lowest intake of these foods. The authors attribute the lower blood pressure readings to positive changes in gut bacteria diversity.⁷

Try following a plant-based diet for four to six weeks to find out how well these foods work for you. Be sure to let your health care provider know about any changes in your blood pressure. Keeping a blood pressure log can help you and your doctor see the effects of plant-based eating.

- **Whole grains**—oats, brown rice, whole-wheat bread or pasta, unsweetened hot or cold cereal, millet, barley, buckwheat groats, and quinoa
- **Beans/legumes**—dried (if canned, avoid added sodium) black-eyed peas, kidney beans, pinto beans, lentils, navy beans, chickpeas, soy milk, tempeh, and tofu
- **Vegetables**—fresh or frozen varieties, such as broccoli, mustard greens, collard greens, kale, spinach, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, corn, and lettuce
- **Fruits**—fresh or frozen varieties, such as bananas, oranges, apples, pears, grapefruit, strawberries, mango, papaya, guava, strawberries, and blueberries

Decrease Your Saturated Fat Intake

Studies show that diets rich in fruits and vegetables and low in saturated fat can both lower the risk for high blood pressure and assist with blood pressure control.^{8,9} Numerous studies have linked beef, veal, lamb, poultry, and animal fat to high blood pressure¹⁰⁻¹² Avoiding saturated fats also reduces the blood's viscosity (or "thickness"), which makes the blood easier to pump.¹³ Avoid foods rich in saturated fat, including red meat, processed meat, poultry, eggs, dairy products, baked goods, and fried foods.

Decrease Your Salt (Sodium) Intake

Cutting down on salt (sodium) helps lower blood pressure. Most of the sodium people consume in the United States comes from processed, packaged, store-bought, and restaurant foods.¹⁴ So cook at home when you can and read nutrition labels for sodium when grocery shopping.

The ideal milligrams of sodium on a packaged food will be less than or equal to the number of calories per serving. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day, and ideally less than 1,500 milligrams per day for most adults.

The following label claims can be placed on a food package to tell you if the product is low in salt per serving:¹⁵

- **Low Sodium**—contains 140 milligrams or less of sodium per serving
- **Very Low Sodium**—contains 35 milligrams or less of sodium per serving
- **Salt/Sodium Free**—contains less than 5 milligrams of sodium per serving

Be careful! Labels that say reduced sodium or light in sodium do not mean low sodium, but rather mean the products contain 25% to 50% less sodium than the original versions, which could still contain high amounts of sodium. In addition, "no salt added" and "unsalted" mean no salt was added during processing, but the product may not be salt free.¹⁶

Here are some tips for cutting the salt in your diet:

- Cook at home instead of eating restaurant or prepackaged food.
- Experiment with different spices and seasonings when cooking, such as fresh garlic, onion, or cilantro, instead of adding salt.
- Avoid hidden sources of sodium in foods like cheese, processed meat, and even chicken.

Maintain a Healthy Weight and Exercise More

Overweight and obesity increase your chances of getting high blood pressure. People who follow a plant-based diet tend to weigh less and have a lower risk of becoming overweight and obese.¹⁷

Avoiding animal products and fried and high-fat foods while eating more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes can promote a healthy weight, and in turn improve blood pressure.

Physical activity can help lower your blood pressure. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week.¹⁸

As an added benefit, maintaining a normal weight (a body mass index between 18.5 kg/m² and 25 kg/m²) and losing excess body fat further reduce the risk of diabetes, heart problems, joint problems, and certain cancers. Because exercise may put added strain on your heart, always consult with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

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