

Hypertension

Blood pressure is a measurement of the force against the walls of your arteries as your heart pumps blood through your body. Blood pressure readings are usually given as two numbers -- for example, 120 over 80 (written as 120/80 mmHg). One or both of these numbers can be too high. The top number is called the systolic blood pressure, and the bottom number is called the diastolic blood pressure.

- Normal blood pressure is when your blood pressure is lower than 120/80 mmHg most of the time.
- High blood pressure (hypertension) is when your blood pressure is 140/90 mmHg or above most of the time.
- If your blood pressure numbers are 120/80 or higher, but below 140/90, it is called pre-hypertension.

If you have pre-hypertension, you are more likely to develop high blood pressure.

Causes

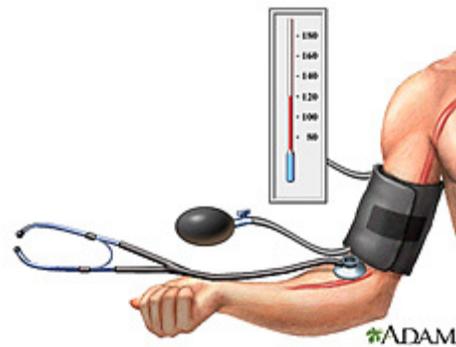
Many factors can affect blood pressure, including:

- How much water and salt you have in your body
- The condition of your kidneys, nervous system, or blood vessels
- The levels of different body hormones

You are more likely to be told your blood pressure is too high as you get older. This is because your blood vessels become stiffer as you age. When that happens, your blood pressure goes up. High blood pressure increases your chance of having a stroke, heart attack, heart failure, kidney disease, and early death.

You have a higher risk of high blood pressure if you:

- Are African American
- Are obese
- Are often stressed or anxious
- Drink too much alcohol
- Eat too much salt in your diet
- Have a family history of high blood pressure
- Have diabetes



Symptoms

Most of the time, there are no symptoms. For most patients, high blood pressure is found when they visit their health care provider or have it checked elsewhere.

Since there are no symptoms, people can develop heart disease and kidney problems without knowing they have high blood pressure.

If you have a severe headache, nausea or vomiting, bad headache, confusion, changes in your vision, or nosebleeds you may have a severe and dangerous form of high blood pressure called malignant hypertension.

Treatment

If you have pre-hypertension, your health care provider will recommend lifestyle changes to bring your blood pressure down to a normal range. Medicines are rarely used for pre-hypertension.

You can do many things to help control your blood pressure, including:

- Eat a heart-healthy diet, including potassium and fiber, and drink plenty of water.
- Exercise regularly -- at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise a day.
- If you smoke, quit -- find a program that will help you stop.
- Limit how much alcohol you drink -- one drink a day for women, two a day for men.
- Limit the amount of sodium (salt) you eat -- aim for less than 1,500 mg per day.
- Reduce stress -- try to avoid things that cause you stress. You can also try meditation or yoga.
- Stay at a healthy body weight -- find a weight-loss program to help you, if you need it.

Your health care provider can help you find programs for losing weight, stopping smoking, and exercising. You can also get a referral from your doctor to a dietitian, who can help you plan a diet that is healthy for you.

Heart Healthy Diet

Eat foods that are naturally low in fat. These include whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Keep them low in fat. Using low-fat toppings, sauces, and dressings will help.

- Look at food labels. Pay special attention to the level of saturated fat.
- Avoid or limit foods that are high in saturated fat (more than 20% of the total fat). Eating too much saturated fat is one of the major risk factors for heart disease.
- Choose lean protein foods -- soy, fish, skinless chicken, very lean meat, and fat-free or 1% dairy products. Look for the words "hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" on food labels. Do NOT eat foods with these ingredients. They are loaded with saturated fats and trans fats.
- Limit how much fried and processed foods you eat. Limit how many commercially prepared baked goods (such as donuts, cookies, and crackers) you eat. They may contain a lot of saturated fats or trans fats.
- Eat fewer products that are high in saturated fats. Some of these are egg yolks, hard cheeses, whole milk, cream, ice cream, butter, and fatty meats (and large portions of meats).
- Pay attention to how foods are prepared. Healthy ways to cook fish, chicken, and lean meats are broiling, grilling, poaching, and baking.

Other tips include:

- Eat foods that are high in soluble fiber. These include oats, bran, split peas and lentils, beans (such as kidney, black, and navy beans), some cereals, and brown rice.
- Learn how to shop for and cook foods that are healthy for your heart. Learn how to read food labels to choose healthy foods. Stay away from fast food restaurants, where healthy choices can be hard to find.

Dash Diet

The low-salt Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet is proven to help lower blood pressure. Its effects on blood pressure are sometimes seen within a few weeks.

This diet is not only rich in important nutrients and fiber, but it also includes foods that contain far more potassium (4,700 milligrams (mg)/day), calcium (1,250 mg/day), and magnesium (500 mg/day) and much less sodium (salt) than the typical American diet.

- Limit sodium to no more than 2,300 mg a day (eating only 1,500 mg a day is an even better goal).
- Reduce saturated fat to no more than 6% of daily calories and total fat to 27% of daily calories. Low-fat dairy products appear to be especially beneficial for lowering systolic blood pressure.
- When choosing fats, select monounsaturated oils, such as olive or canola oils.
- Choose whole grains over white flour or pasta products.
- Choose fresh fruits and vegetables every day. Many of these foods are rich in potassium, fiber, or both.
- Eat nuts, seeds, or legumes (dried beans or peas) daily.
- Choose modest amounts of protein (no more than 18% of total daily calories). Fish, skinless poultry, and soy products are the best protein sources.
- Other daily nutrient goals in the DASH diet include limiting carbohydrates to 55% of daily calories and dietary cholesterol to 150 mg. Try to get at least 30 grams (g) of daily fiber.

Before you increase the potassium in your diet or use salt substitutes (which often contain potassium), check with your doctor. People who have kidney problems or who take certain medicines must be careful about how much potassium they consume.

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