

# WHAT IS HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE?

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High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is a major risk factor for serious health problems. Nearly 1 in 3 American adults suffer from hypertension, and around half of these cases go untreated.<sup>1</sup> Uncontrolled high blood pressure contributes to some of the leading causes of death in the United States, including heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes.<sup>2</sup>

Since hypertension rarely has clear signs or symptoms, blood pressure should be assessed on a regular basis.

Doctors use two measurements to check blood pressure: systolic blood pressure (SBP), the pressure in the arteries with every heartbeat, and diastolic blood pressure (DBP), the pressure in the arteries between heartbeats.

## Blood Pressure Reading Ranges<sup>3</sup>

Classification	SBP	DBP
Normal	<120	and <80
Prehypertension	120-139	or 80-89
Stage 1 Hypertension	140-159	or 90-99
Stage 2 Hypertension	>160	or >100

Bringing blood pressure under control is very important for maintaining good health, and treatment may often involve taking medication. However, changes in your diet can both lower blood pressure and reduce your medication needs.

## How Can I Control My Blood Pressure and Prevent Hypertension?

### Go Plant-Based

Vegans and vegetarians tend to have a lower blood pressure and lower risk of hypertension than omnivores.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

A 2014 meta-analysis published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* found that consumption of vegetarian diets was associated with significantly lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure

compared to omnivorous diets. The reductions seen are comparable to the effects of other lifestyle interventions for addressing high blood pressure—such as a low-sodium diet or an approximately 10-pound weight loss—or around half the effect of traditional pharmaceutical therapy.<sup>4</sup>

Plant-based diets are typically low in sodium and characterized by high intakes of fruit and vegetables, which are rich in fiber and potassium. These factors, combined with the lower body mass index associated with vegan diets, may explain the diet's blood pressure lowering effects.

Try following a plant-based diet for four to six weeks to find out how well these foods will work for you. Then have your doctor check your blood pressure.

Focus on incorporating more of the following plant-based foods into your meals to promote a healthy blood pressure.

- **Whole grains**—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, and corn
- **Fruits**—fresh or frozen varieties, such as bananas, oranges, apples, pears, grapefruit, strawberries, mango, papaya, guava, strawberries, and blueberries

## Read the “Nutrition Facts” Label and Eat Less Salt

The amount of salt in a food product per serving is listed on the nutrition facts label as sodium. The Percent Daily Value (% DV) of sodium is based on the recommended intake of less than 2,400 milligrams of sodium a day for disease prevention. Cutting down on sodium helps reduce blood pressure.

The following label claims can be placed on a food package to tell you if the product is low in salt per serving:<sup>7</sup>

- **Low Sodium** — contains 140 milligrams or less sodium per serving
- **Very Low Sodium** — contains 35 milligrams or less 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 25-50 percent less sodium than the original versions, which could still contain high amounts of sodium.<sup>7</sup> Products that say No Salt Added or Unsalted will vary in amount of naturally occurring sodium and may not be guaranteed sodium free.

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

- **Gradually use less salt when cooking.** Your taste buds will soon adjust.
- **Avoid adding extra salt at the table.** Instead, try experimenting with different spices and seasonings when cooking, such as fresh garlic, onion, or cilantro.
- **Avoid large portions of salty snacks** like pretzels and potato chips.
- **Avoid canned foods that contain added salt** Look for varieties that say “no sodium added” or “low sodium” on the label. Try fresh or frozen vegetables, which are naturally low in sodium, in place of canned ones.
- **Limit foods that are pickled or packed in brine,** such as pickles and olives, as well as common high-sodium condiments like ketchup, mustard, and barbecue sauce. Regular varieties of soy sauce or tamari also have very high levels of sodium per serving.

## Maintain a Healthy Weight and Exercise More

Overweight and obesity increase your chances of developing high blood pressure. Individuals who follow a plant-based diet tend to weigh less and have a lower risk of becoming overweight and obese.<sup>8</sup>

Avoiding animal products and fried and high-fat foods while increasing intake of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes can promote a healthful weight, and in turn improve blood pressure.

Physical activity can help lower your blood pressure. Try including a brisk walk for 30 minutes to an hour at least three times per week.

As an added benefit, maintaining a normal weight (a body mass index between 18.5kg/m<sup>2</sup> - 25 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) and losing excess body fat further reduces 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.

## References

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