

Hypertension and Diet

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is very common in the UK with one in four UK adults being affected.

This fact sheet will tell you about simple changes to your diet that can help reduce the health risks that having high blood pressure can cause. The older we get, the risks of developing high blood pressure increases because our blood vessels don't stretch as well any more. There is nothing we can do to stop our bodies aging but there are plenty of other lifestyle changes we can make, including changing our diet, that can help to control our blood pressure. If left untreated, hypertension increases the risk of heart attacks and stroke as well as kidney and eye damage.

Should I cut down on salt?

Yes – people who have a lot of salt in their diet are more likely to have high blood pressure. Most people eat far more salt than they need so we should all be aiming to reduce the amount of salt (or sodium chloride) we eat. Adults should have no more than six grams of salt a day – that's about one teaspoon. It is the sodium in salt that contributes to high blood pressure and it is present in all types of salt including sea salt, flakes, crystals and flavoured salt.

There are a number of simple ways you can cut your salt intake:

- If you add salt to food at the table, remove the salt cellar from the table.
- Once you have got used to this, try reducing the salt you add when cooking and make more use of herbs and spices.
- There is no need to add salt if you are using a stock cube as they contain lots of salt. Also try using a reduced salt stock cube.
- Some people like to use a salt substitute, made from potassium chloride. However as your food will still taste salty, it won't help you get used to a less



salty taste. Also salt substitutes are not suitable for some people, for example those with kidney problems or heart failure. Check with your doctor before using them.

- Try to reduce the amount of processed foods you eat. 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.
- If you are unable to cook from fresh, check the label for lower salt varieties when you do need to use them. As a guideline, less than 0.3g salt (or 0.1g sodium) per 100g of food is 'a little' and over 1.5g salt (or 0.6g sodium) per 100g is 'a lot'.

What about alcohol?

It is well known that having a moderate alcohol intake can have benefits for your heart but drinking too much alcohol is known to increase blood pressure. If you don't currently drink there is no need to start, but if you do enjoy a drink, make sure you stay within the UK recommended guidelines of no more than 3-4 units a day for men and no more than 2-3 units a day for women.

Also make sure that you have at least two days a week when you don't drink any alcohol.

Cutting down on salt, keeping to the recommended amount of alcohol and eating a diet rich in essential minerals will all help to lower blood pressure.

Is losing weight beneficial?

There is a strong link between high blood pressure and being overweight. This is especially true if the weight is carried centrally i.e. around your waist.

Losing weight (even as little as 5-10% of your starting weight) will help. Slow and steady weight loss (about 1-2 lbs (0.5-1kg) per week) is the healthiest way to lose weight and the weight is more likely to stay off than if you lose it quickly.

The best way to lose weight and reduce your waist size is by reducing your calorie intake and increasing your daily physical activity.

Can other dietary factors help?

There are studies that have shown that eating a diet rich in certain essential minerals and fibre whilst choosing low fat dairy foods, helps to lower blood pressure.

Here are the most useful findings:

Fruit and vegetables – aim to eat at least five portions per day as they are rich in fibre, vitamins and minerals. Fresh, frozen, dried, juiced and canned all count. If you are using canned vegetables, look for lower salt varieties to make sure you stay under the 6g daily limit.

Dairy foods – choose low-fat options such as semi-skimmed milk, low-fat yoghurts and low-fat cheese that are still good sources of minerals, but keep saturated fat to a minimum. Include two to three servings per day.

Wholegrains – including breakfast cereals, brown pasta and wholegrain bread. Aim for two to three servings per day to boost your fibre intake.

Oily fish – include at least one portion of these dark-fleshed fish per week. They are rich in omega 3 fatty acids which have been shown to have some effect on reducing blood pressure. Examples include salmon, pilchards, sardines, mackerel, herring and trout.

Taking dietary supplements such as calcium, magnesium and potassium is not recommended for reducing blood pressure.

Other lifestyle factors

Being physically active is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your blood pressure. Try to build more physical activity into your lifestyle aiming for at least 150 minutes (2 ½ hours) of moderate intensity activity a week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more.

'Moderate intensity' means any activity that makes you feel warmer, breathe harder and makes your heart beat faster than usual. Remember to check first with your doctor if you have heart problems or are new to exercise.

Drinking a lot of caffeine can raise blood pressure. If you drink a lot of coffee, tea and cola drinks you should try cutting down.

Being under stress can raise blood pressure. Using relaxation techniques such as meditation can help reduce blood pressure.

Healthy changes to your lifestyle in this way can help to achieve a significant drop in your blood pressure levels, whether or not you are taking tablets. The effects can often be seen quite quickly – usually within weeks of starting.

Summary

Simple changes to your diet and lifestyle can be a very effective part of treatment. Cutting down on salt, keeping to the recommended amount of alcohol and eating a diet rich in essential minerals will all help to lower blood pressure. Make sure you have at least 5-a-day of fruit and vegetables, and two or three servings of low-fat dairy foods and wholegrains. Try to have one portion of oily fish each week. Being physically active is one of the most important things you can do to reduce your blood pressure.

Further information

Other Food Fact Sheets on similar or relevant topics such as *Heart Health, Salt, Fruit and Veg – how to get 5-a-day, Omega-3, Alcohol and Wholegrains* are available from www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts



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To check your dietitian is registered check www.hcpc-uk.org

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