

Definition and causes

Hypertension means blood pressure (BP) consistently higher than normal for your age-group. Normal BP for an adult is 120/80. As a rough guide mild hypertension might be 140/95, moderate 150/105 and severe hypertension is above 160/115. BP varies according to the time of day and level of stress so it should be measured several times over days or weeks to get a true picture.

Hypertension may be due to genetic factors: it sometimes runs in families. Or it may be due to disease, for example of the kidneys or the adrenal glands. 'Essential hypertension' simply means the cause is unknown.

It is very often caused by lifestyle factors.

Bringing down blood pressure (BP)

Whatever the cause, it is always helpful to change harmful lifestyle factors. Such changes often bring down blood pressure without the need for drugs. They also increase the action of drugs where they are needed and they reduce the risk of serious disease.

Recommendations

- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, fish, nuts and seeds. Minimise salt and animal fat. (Detail on p.2)
- Don't smoke
- Be active:
 - Accumulate 30 minutes of gentle exercise every day and 20 minutes of moderate exercise 2 or 3 times a week.
 - Moderate exercise raises your heart rate and makes you breathless but not so much you can't talk.
 - You could walk, dance, swim, cycle or do vigorous housework - no need to join a gym or play sport.
 - It's a good idea to choose the stairs instead of lifts or escalators.
- Avoid alcohol or drink within recommended limits
- Keep to a healthy weight
 - Keep your weight within the recommended range for your height.
 - If overweight, change diet and/or exercise more.
 - Don't go on a restricted diet. A healthy diet with the correct portion sizes will be easier to stick to, more enjoyable and much better for your health.
- Manage your stress
 - We all need a certain amount of stress but we must recognise when it is affecting our health.
 - Avoid or remove unhealthy stress where you can.
 - If you can't avoid or remove it, change the way you respond to it.
 - Try and find a good listener to talk to.
 - Be kind to yourself. Make sure there is enough fun in your life.
 - Breathe deeply

Stressed person's prayer:

"Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change,
the courage to change what I cannot accept
and the wisdom to know the difference"

Diet

Dietary factors that are known to cause high BP include:

- too much salt in relation to potassium, magnesium and calcium
- too much saturated fat
- not enough Omega oils
- not enough fibre
- not enough vitamins C and E

Eat/drink plenty	Eat/drink as little as possible
Fibre: Fruit, vegetables, lentils, beans and whole grains	Refined carbohydrate: Sugar, white bread, rice and pasta
Potassium-rich foods: Watercress, endive, cabbage, celery, parsley, courgettes, radishes, cauliflower, mushrooms, pumpkin, potatoes, corn, molasses, bananas, asparagus, avocados, oranges, peaches, strawberries, potatoes, corn, watercress,	Salty foods: Salt in your cooking, salt added at the table, processed meat, smoked fish, salted nuts and crisps, readymade meals and sauces
Magnesium-rich foods: Wheatgerm, almonds, cashew nuts, Brazil nuts, buckwheat, peanuts, pecan nuts, cooked beans, garlic, raisins, pea, potato skins, crab.	Ready-made meals because they are often high in salt, sugar and saturated fat, and low in healthy minerals and vitamins.
Calcium-rich foods: Green leafy vegetables: parsley, kale, lettuce etc. cheese, almonds, prunes, pumpkins, cabbage, cooked dried beans, globe artichokes.	
Omega oils: Omega 3 - Salmon, mackerel, herring, sardines, tuna, flax (linseed), pumpkin, walnut Omega 6 - corn, sunflower, sesame, soya beans, wheatgerm, borage oil, evening primrose oil	Saturated fat: Butter, cheese (apart from cottage cheese), animal fat, fried food, crisps, coconut oil. Cakes and biscuits (except where fat-free or with mono- or poly-unsaturated oil or fat)
Vitamin C: Raw fruit and vegetables, especially berries, citrus fruit, kiwi fruit, melon, peppers, watercress, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes	
Vitamin E: Nuts and seeds (and their oils), peas, beans, corn, whole grains	
Special vegetable known to lower BP and cholesterol: Celery, garlic and onions	
Fluid: Water, pure fruit juice, smoothies, Caffeine-free tea: Redbush tea, herbal tea	Stimulants: coffee, tea, cola Alcohol: Women - no more than 1-2 units a day Men - no more than 3-4 units a day All - at least one alcohol-free day a week
Note 1: Arterial tension is controlled by the balance of calcium, magnesium and potassium in relation to sodium (salt) Stress also plays a part. Fish oils and the correct balance of minerals also protect against nervous tension.	
Note 2: Vitamin C, E and fish oils help keep the blood thin which helps prevent disease related to high BP	
Note 3: Vitamin C works with B vitamins to produce energy and with Vitamin E to protect cells from damage, prevent blood clots, thrombosis and the clogging of arteries	
Note 4: You can buy Omega oils prepared in the right proportions of Omega 3 and 6. You can put these in salad dressings and smoothies. They should be kept in the fridge, away from light and heat.	