

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. Your doctor will likely need to monitor your blood pressure and medications.

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 and potassium. These factors, combined with the lower body mass index (BMI) associated with vegan diets, may explain how the diet lowers blood pressure.

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 Salt (Sodium) Intake

Cutting down on salt (sodium) helps lower blood pressure. Most of the sodium people consume in America comes from processed, packaged, store-bought, and restaurant foods.⁷ So cook at home

when you can and read nutrition labels for sodium when grocery shopping.

The amount of salt in a serving of packaged food is listed on the “Nutrition Facts” label as sodium. The Percent Daily Value (% DV) of sodium is based on the recommended daily intake of less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium (about 1 teaspoon of salt) for disease prevention.

The following label claims can be placed on a food package to tell you if the product is low in salt per serving:⁶

- **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.⁸

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

- Cook at home instead of eating restaurant or prepackaged food.
- Gradually use less salt when cooking. Your taste buds will soon adjust.
- At the table, experiment with different spices and seasonings when cooking, such as fresh garlic, onion, or cilantro, instead of adding salt.

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- 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. Rinse and drain canned beans to remove excess salt.
- Limit foods that are pickled or packed in brine, such as pickles and olives.
- Limit high-sodium condiments like ketchup, mustard, and barbecue sauce. Soy sauce and tamari are also high in sodium.

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.⁹

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.¹⁰

As an added benefit, maintaining a normal weight (a BMI between 18.5 kg/m² and 25 kg/m²) 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.