

Hypertension

High blood pressure, or hypertension, is very common in the UK – one in four adults has it. 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.

What causes hypertension?

The older we get the risks of developing high blood pressure increase 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 – having too much salt in your diet is a major cause of high blood pressure. We should all be aiming to reduce the amount of salt (or sodium chloride) we eat and we can do this in a number of different ways.

- To start with, if you add salt when cooking you should remove the salt cellar from the table.
- Once you have got used to this, try reducing the salt you add when cooking. Try making 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; try using a reduced-salt stock cube.
- Some people like to use a salt substitute, made from potassium chloride, where a dish really needs it. However, this doesn't allow us to get used to eating meals with a less salty taste.
- 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 0.25g salt (or 0.1g sodium) per 100g of food is 'a little' and over 1.25g salt (or 0.5g sodium) per 100g is 'a lot'.
- As an adult aim to have less than 6g (around a teaspoon) of salt a day.

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 3-4 units a day for men and 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.

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, steady weight loss of 1-2 lbs (0.5-1kg) per week can be achieved on a calorie-controlled diet combined with regular physical activity.

Can other dietary factors help?

There are studies that have shown that eating a low-fat diet, rich in certain essential minerals and fibre, helps to lower blood pressure. Here are the most useful findings:

- Fruit and vegetables – aim to eat at least five portions per day 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 of 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 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on five or more days of the week. This can be broken up into segments of 10-15 minutes. 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.

Changing 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 can be a very effective part of treatment. Cut down on salt, keep to the recommended amount of alcohol and eat a low-fat diet, rich in essential minerals – all will 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:

Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Heart Health, Salt, Fruit and Veg – how to get 5-a-day, Omega-3, Alcohol and Wholegrains are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

Information on weight loss is available at www.bdaweightwise.com

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This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts
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