

# Living Healthy with Hypertension

## *The Importance of Diet and Exercise in Controlling Blood Pressure*

**Abstract:** In many cases, high blood pressure can be reduced or even prevented by simple lifestyle changes. Do you know what these lifestyle changes are?

Many factors such as genetics, obesity, lack of physical activity, salt intake, alcohol consumption, stress, and age contribute to the development of hypertension. However, hypertension can be prevented in some people or controlled in others by a combination of diet and exercise. There are six key lifestyle changes that will help you control your blood pressure and minimize the associated complications.

### Keys to Controlling Your Blood Pressure

1. Maintain a healthy weight
2. Exercise on a regular basis
3. Follow a healthy eating plan
4. Reduce salt (sodium) intake
5. Reduce alcohol consumption
6. Reduce stress

Maintaining a healthy weight can be difficult for many people. However, being overweight greatly increases your risk of developing high blood pressure. In fact, being overweight can make you two to six times more likely to develop high blood pressure than if you are within a normal weight range. The age adjusted prevalence of hypertension in adults who are obese (BMI  $\geq$  30) is 41.9 percent for men and 37.8 percent for women. In comparison, the prevalence in adults who are at a normal weight (BMI  $<$ 25) is 14.9 percent for men and 15.2 percent for women. Losing even 10 pounds and maintaining this weight loss can help lower your blood pressure. The best way to lose weight is a combination of eating right and exercising.

Getting regular exercise is a great way to lose weight and to promote all over cardiovascular health. To prevent or control high blood pressure be sure to get at least 30 minutes of moderate level physical activity on most days of the week. Activities such as fast walking, bicycling, raking leaves, gardening and swimming are excellent for promoting blood pressure control. However, check with your doctor before becoming more physically active. Try to fit exercise into your daily life. Even a slight increase in physical activity can help lower your health risk.

In addition to exercise, in order to lose weight one must also learn to follow a healthy eating plan. Even if you are not overweight, following a healthy eating plan can help you to reduce your blood pressure. A healthy plan is one that is low in saturated fat, total fat, and cholesterol and high in fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy foods. A good eating plan to follow is the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) plan. This eating plan includes whole grains,

poultry, fish, and nuts. Fish is an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids which may help to reduce elevated blood pressure. Furthermore, fish is low in saturated fat and calories. The DASH eating plan also limits fats, red meats, sweets, and sugared drinks. This eating plan provides high amounts of potassium, calcium, and magnesium all of which are important in maintaining good blood pressure control.

One of the most important things you can do to help control your blood pressure is to reduce your daily sodium intake. Salt, MSG, and baking soda all contain sodium. Most people should not consume more than 2.4 grams of sodium or 1 teaspoonful of table salt a day. Depending on your condition your doctor may want you to consume less than 2.4 grams daily. Salt substitutes are available, however, you should talk with your doctor before using them.

Alcohol consumption also has a big effect on blood pressure. Drinking too much alcohol can raise your blood pressure. It is high in calories and can cause you to gain weight. Furthermore, when consumed in high quantities, alcohol has negative effects on the liver, brain, and heart. If you are going to drink alcoholic beverages do so in moderation. One drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men is considered moderate alcohol consumption.

The final key to controlling your blood pressure is reducing your stress. This can be accomplished by exercising, practicing yoga, stretching or by simply making time to do something you enjoy. Make time for yourself everyday by setting aside a specific block of time for the relaxing activity of your choice. Call this activity your prescription for a low stress life.

**For more information, please consult the following websites:**

[http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/mission/partner/should\\_know.pdf](http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/mission/partner/should_know.pdf)

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp>

[http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Hbp/HBP\\_WhatIs.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Hbp/HBP_WhatIs.html)

<http://www.diabetes.org/nutrition-and-recipes/nutrition/overview.jsp>

[http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/new\\_dash.pdf](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/hbp/dash/new_dash.pdf)