

Hypertension treatment – Lifestyle changes

Lifestyle changes are advocated as first-line therapy for hypertension treatment. Dietary and exercise interventions have been shown to reduce blood pressure by at least 10mmHg in about a quarter of people with high blood pressure (hypertension). High blood pressure is one of a number of risk factors that increase your chance of developing heart disease, stroke and other serious conditions. The higher your blood pressure, the greater the risk.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES TO LOWER HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

Lose weight if overweight

Blood pressure often increases as weight increases. In general, the more weight you lose, the lower your blood pressure. Blood pressure can decrease by 2.5/1.5mmHg for every excess kilogram lost. Losing weight does not only benefit blood pressure, but has lots of other health benefits too. It is best for you and your doctor to determine your target weight and the best way for you to achieve it.

Exercise regularly

Regular physical activity – at least 30 minutes of vigorous exercise on most days of the week – can lower your blood pressure by 4 to 9 mmHg. If you previously did little exercise, results can be seen in a few weeks. Examples of good physical activities include brisk walking, swimming, cycling, dancing and jogging. Your doctor will determine if you have any exercise restrictions and can develop an exercise program tailored to your needs.

Eat a healthy diet

Eating a varied diet rich in whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables and low-fat dairy products, and low in saturated fat and cholesterol has been shown to lower blood pressure.

- Eat at least 5 portions (ideally 7-9 portions) of a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables a day.
- The bulk of most meals must be starch based (cereals, wholegrain bread, potatoes, rice and pasta) together with fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Reduce intake of fatty foods like fatty meat, cheese, fried food and butter. Use low fat, unsaturated fats as an alternative.
- If you eat meat, it is best to eat lean meat or chicken. Include 2-3 portions of fish into your diet each week (one of which should be oily fish like herring, mackerel, sardines or salmon).
- Reduce salt intake.

Following a healthy diet has numerous additional benefits including lowering cholesterol and reducing weight.

Reduce salt/sodium intake

Even a modest reduction in salt intake can lower your blood pressure. It is recommended that we should not consume more than 5-6g of salt daily. Unfortunately most people consume more than this. Avoiding processed foods, which are often high in sodium, can reduce your daily intake. Always read food labels – you might be surprised how much sodium/salt a product contains. Rather choose foods labeled “no salt added” or “low in salt”. Limit the amount of salt used in cooking.

Limit alcohol consumption

Alcohol in small amounts (1-2 units* per day) can be good for your health by protecting against heart attacks and coronary artery disease, however this protective effect is lost if you drink too much alcohol. If you drink alcohol in moderate amounts, it can raise blood pressure by several points as well as reducing the effectiveness of blood pressure medication.

- Men should not drink more than 21 units of alcohol per week (and no more than 4 units in any one day)
 - Women should not drink more than 14 units of alcohol per week (and no more than 3 units in any one day)
- Avoid binge drinking as this can cause a large and sudden increase in blood pressure, in addition to other health problems.

*One unit of alcohol equates to half a pint of normal strength beer, or 2/3 small glass of wine or one measure of spirits.

Restrict caffeine consumption

Caffeine is thought to have a modest effect on blood pressure, but this is still debatable. Consumption of caffeinated beverages has been shown to cause a temporary spike in blood pressure. Regular caffeine consumption can cause higher than average blood pressure, therefore it is advised to restrict caffeine consumption to fewer than 5 cups per day.

Smoking

Smoking is not thought to directly affect blood pressure, but smoking adds a health risk if your blood pressure is already raised. Every effort should be made to stop smoking. If you experience difficulty consult your doctor or practice nurse for help and advice.

Reduce stress

Stress or anxiety can cause a temporary increase in blood pressure. Try reducing daily stress by identifying the cause of stress and considering ways to reduce or eliminate it.

Reference: High Blood Pressure (Hypertension) Lifestyle treatments to lower high blood pressure. Yaxley Group Practice, Peterborough 2009. Used with permission