

# Healthy eating and blood pressure



**Blood Pressure  
Association**  
the blood pressure charity

# Pressure Points series

Pressure Points is a series of booklets produced by the Blood Pressure Association, to help people with high blood pressure take practical steps to manage their condition. The booklets in the series are:

- 1 Introducing high blood pressure**
- 2 Healthy eating and blood pressure**
- 3 Healthy lifestyle and blood pressure**
- 4 Getting the most from blood pressure medicines**
- 5 Measuring your blood pressure at home**

The Blood Pressure Association is a registered charity and we rely on donations to help us carry out our work. We would be grateful for any donation that you can make towards the cost of producing this booklet. Contact us by telephone (020 8772 4994) or visit our website ([www.bpassoc.org.uk](http://www.bpassoc.org.uk)).

High blood pressure is the **biggest** known cause of disability and premature death in the UK through stroke, heart attack and heart disease. **One in three adults** in the UK **has high blood pressure** and every day 350 people have a preventable stroke or heart attack caused by the condition.

# Healthy eating and blood pressure

What you eat and drink can have a real effect on the health of your heart and blood vessels. A healthy diet will help to keep them in good shape, reducing your risk of future health problems.

What you eat and drink can also directly affect your blood pressure.

In general, the healthier your diet is, the lower your blood pressure will be. To help keep your blood pressure down, it is important to keep to a healthy diet.



If you have high blood pressure, it is even more important to look closely at your diet. If you make healthy changes to what you eat and drink, this can help to lower your blood pressure. If you take medicines for your blood pressure, a

healthy diet can help these to work better, and can reduce the amount of medicines you need. For a few people, changing to a healthy lifestyle will help them to avoid medicines altogether.

To help lower your blood pressure you should try to:

- ♥ Eat less than six grams of salt a day
- ♥ Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- ♥ Drink no more than two to three units of alcohol a day
- ♥ Avoid foods that contain a lot of saturated fat



# Salt

Salt makes your body hold on to water. If you eat too much salt, the extra water stored in your body will raise your blood pressure.



An adult should eat no more than six grams of salt a day, but most of us eat almost twice that amount. Most of the salt we eat is not what we add to cooking or at the table. Around 80% of the salt we eat is in prepared foods like bread, breakfast cereals, biscuits and ready meals.

## ♥ Read the labels

Check food labels to see how much salt the food contains. Labels may tell you the amount of salt in each pack, in each portion, or in every 100g.

Some labels may not say how much salt the food contains, but they may say how much sodium it contains. Sodium is one of the chemicals in salt, and one gram of sodium is equal to two-and-a-half grams of salt.

If the label does not say how much salt the food contains, look at the ingredients list. The closer to the top of the list salt is, the more salt the food is likely to contain.

### Amount of salt per 100g

0.3g or less	Eat plenty of these
0.3g to 1.5g	Eat small amounts occasionally
1.5g or more	Avoid these completely



## 10 ways to eat less salt

- 1 Don't add salt when cooking. This includes things like soy sauce, curry powders and stock cubes.
- 2 Get extra flavour with herbs and spices, and from seasonings like chilli, ginger, lemon or lime juice.
- 3 Table sauces like ketchup, mustard and pickles can contain a lot of salt. Check the label and choose low-salt options.
- 4 Bread and breakfast cereals can contain a lot of salt. Check the labels to compare brands.
- 5 Smoked meats and fish contain a lot of salt. Avoid these if you can.
- 6 If you are eating out, ask if your meal can be made with less salt. This may not be possible, but it is always worth asking.
- 7 If you really want a salty favour, use a small amount of low-sodium salt substitute. If you have kidney problems or diabetes, check with your doctor or nurse first.
- 8 Look out for low-salt recipes. There are a number of low-salt cookbooks available, or you can search for recipes on the internet.
- 9 Don't be too concerned about the exact amount of salt you eat. Six grams a day is the recommended maximum, and the less you eat the better.
- 10 At first, food without salt can taste bland, but don't give up. After a few weeks your taste buds will adjust and you will start to enjoy food with less salt.



# Fruit and vegetables

Fruit and vegetables are full of vitamins, minerals and fibre to keep your body in good condition. They also contain potassium, which can help to balance out the negative effects of salt. This has a direct effect on your blood pressure, helping to keep it down.

## ♥ Eat at least five portions a day

Adults should eat at least five different portions of fruit and vegetables per day. A portion is 80 grams, or roughly the size of your fist. The following amounts represent a portion.

- A dessert bowl of salad
- Three heaped tablespoons of vegetables
- Three heaped tablespoons of pulses (chickpeas, lentils, beans and so on)
- One medium-sized fruit (apple, orange, pear, banana)
- Two smaller fruits (plums, apricots, satsumas)
- One slice of a large fruit (melon, pineapple, mango)
- Two to three tablespoons of berries or grapes
- A glass (150ml) of fruit or vegetable juice
- One tablespoon of dried fruit



## ♥ Not everything counts

Potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams, cassava and plantain are all vegetables, but they do not count towards your five a day. However, you should still include them as part of a healthy diet.

Pulses, fruit juice and vegetable juice all count towards your five a day. However they only count as one portion no matter how much you eat or drink.



## 10 ways to get the best from fruit and vegetables

- 1 Don't buy fruit and vegetable dishes that come with sauces. They often contain a lot of fat, salt and sugar.
- 2 Dried, frozen and tinned products can be just as good as fresh, but watch out for added salt, sugar or fats.
- 3 Vary the types of fruit and vegetables you eat. Each has different health benefits and it will keep your meals interesting.
- 4 Don't add sugar to fruit or salt to vegetables when you cook or serve them.
- 5 Vegetables keep more of their vitamins and minerals if you lightly steam or bake them, instead of boiling or frying them.
- 6 If you boil vegetables, use as little water as possible to help keep the vitamins and minerals in them.
- 7 Experiment with other ways of cooking vegetables, such as roasting or grilling them, for new tastes and flavours.
- 8 Stir-fries are great for getting lots of vegetables into one meal. So are freshly-made soups.
- 9 Make fruit smoothies with lots of fresh fruit and low-fat milk or yoghurt.
- 10 Replace sweet snacks, such as chocolate or biscuits, with fruit or raw vegetables.



# Alcohol

If you drink too much alcohol, this will raise your blood pressure over time. Alcohol also contains a lot of calories which can cause you to gain weight. This will also increase your blood pressure.

If you keep to the recommended limits for alcohol, this will help to keep your blood pressure down. The current recommended limits are 21 units of alcohol a week for men, and 14 units a week for women.

## How many units are in what you drink?

Single measure of spirits (25ml)	1 unit
Pint of normal-strength beer	2 units
Medium glass of wine (175ml)	2 units
Large glass of wine (250ml)	3 units
Pint of strong beer	4 units



## Drinking less alcohol

Even if you do not drink too much, you can benefit from drinking less alcohol. Here are some tips to help you have a good night out (or in) without having to worry about your blood pressure.

- 1 Try low-alcohol options – there are now a number of lower-strength beers on the market.
- 2 Check the label – many drinks labels now tell you how many units they contain.
- 3 Make your drinks last longer by adding mixers or water.
- 4 Don't eat bar snacks like crisps and peanuts – the added salt will make you want to drink more, and will also raise your blood pressure.
- 5 If you drink at home, buy a measure so that you know how much you are drinking.

# Fats

A low-fat diet can help you keep to a healthy weight, which in turn will help keep your blood pressure down.

A diet that is low in fat can also help you keep down the level of cholesterol in your blood. Too much cholesterol can raise your risk of heart disease and stroke, so if you have high blood pressure it is very important to keep your cholesterol levels low.

## ♥ Types of fat

Avoid eating too much saturated fat. This is usually found in red meats, butter, palm oil or ghee.

Polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats can be found in olive oil, rapeseed oil or sunflower oil. Unlike saturated fat, these fats will not raise your cholesterol levels. However they will still cause you to gain weight if you eat too much.

The type of fat you eat is important. Some fats are more likely to raise your cholesterol levels.

### Amount of fat per 100g

Less than 3g total fat or 1g saturated fat	These foods are a good choice
Between 3–20g total fat or 1–5g saturated fat	Eat small amounts occasionally
More than 20g total fat or 5g saturated fat	Avoid these completely



# Making healthy eating part of your life

It is one thing to know that a healthy diet will help your blood pressure. It is another thing to be able to make all the changes you need, and to stick with them. Here are some tips from other people with high blood pressure which may help you.

- ♥ 'Learn more about your food. Check the labels and make more meals from scratch so you know what you're eating.'
- ♥ 'Don't think about 'giving things up' but about trying new things instead. Experiment with new flavours and try new things.'
- ♥ 'Get the family involved. Nothing is worse than being surrounded by people who are eating the things you can't have.'
- ♥ 'Plan ahead for meals and snacks. Make sure you have healthy food nearby to stop you reaching for salty or fatty foods.'
- ♥ 'Be sensible, and don't try to do everything at once. Take small steps and build on them as you go along.'

If you want to lower your blood pressure through a healthy diet, it is really important to stick to the changes in this booklet. In a few weeks you will get used to the new tastes and flavours, and you will also see the difference it makes to your blood pressure.

## NADINE'S STORY

Nadine was diagnosed with high blood pressure following the birth of her youngest child. She says the diagnosis changed her life, in particular her diet.

My doctor recommended I try a no-salt diet, which was very hard at first but gradually my taste buds adjusted. In general, I have had to learn to be much more aware of what I am eating.



'I know I'm eating better now'

It took a while to get used to, and at the start, shopping would take twice as long because I had to check the labels on everything I bought. I also had to learn to add different things to bring out the flavour in my food.

My family helps to keep me on the right track, and my daughters are always there to remind me what I should and shouldn't eat! It has been hard changing my diet, but I know I'm eating better now, and it's encouraged me to try new foods and recipes.'

## About this booklet

This booklet has been written to help you lower your blood pressure by eating more healthily. A healthy diet can have a real effect on your blood pressure. This booklet gives practical tips on how to make healthy changes, including how to:

- ♥ **Eat less salt**
- ♥ **Eat more fruit and vegetables**
- ♥ **Drink less alcohol**
- ♥ **Avoid saturated fats**

The booklet has been produced by the Information & Support team at the Blood Pressure Association. It was written with help from people who have high blood pressure, and from professionals who are experts in the field. It is intended for people who have high blood pressure, or who are interested in high blood pressure. For more about how we make our information, go to [www.bpassoc.org.uk/AboutUs](http://www.bpassoc.org.uk/AboutUs)

## About the Blood Pressure Association

We are the UK's leading blood pressure charity – lowering the nation's blood pressure to prevent stroke, heart attack and heart disease. High blood pressure can be successfully treated and prevented. We are here to help.

Published July 2008



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