

Blood Pressure: What You Need to Know

Blood pressure is the force of blood against the walls of your arteries. Your blood pressure is measured as two numbers, the systolic pressure (as the heart beats) and the diastolic pressure (as the heart relaxes). Blood pressure is written as systolic/diastolic pressure. For example:

- Optimal—120/80 or lower
- Prehypertension—120-139/80-89
- High—140/90 or greater

You have high blood pressure if it is 140/90 or higher. High blood pressure also is known as “hypertension.” If you have high blood pressure, you have more of a risk for developing heart disease and stroke.

Causes high blood pressure

Many different things cause high blood pressure, including:

- Narrowing of the arteries—blood has to move through a narrower space
- A greater than normal volume of blood—too much blood forced through the system
- The heart beating faster or more forcefully—possibly because of heart size, stress, anxiety, etc
- Certain medications

At risk for high blood pressure

Many people develop high blood pressure as they get older. Ninety percent of all middle-aged individuals develop hypertension. If you have any of the following, you are possibly at risk for developing high blood pressure:

- Are overweight
- Have a family history of high blood pressure
- Have a high normal blood pressure (130-139/85-89 millimeters of mercury [mm Hg])
- Are African American

Treating high blood pressure

To treat hypertension, you should:

- Eat healthfully
- Lower salt and sodium intake in you diet
- Lose weight if you are overweight
- Keep physically active
- Limit alcohol intake
- Quit smoking

If these steps fail to lower your blood pressure to what is considered a healthy blood pressure, your doctor may prescribe a blood-pressure-lowering medication.

Reducing salt and sodium in the diet

It is recommended that you eat 2.3 grams (g) or 2300 milligrams (mg) of sodium/day or less. That is equivalent to about 1 teaspoon (tsp) of table salt/day. Remember though, the 2.3 g of

sodium or 1 tsp of table salt includes the salt and sodium in all the foods you eat, not just the amount that you add to your foods. If you have high blood pressure, your doctor or dietitian may advise you to eat less salt and sodium.

The following tips can help you reduce the amount of salt and sodium in your diet:

- Add less salt at the table and in cooking
- Buy fresh or plain frozen vegetables, instead of canned vegetables
- Use fresh poultry, fish, and lean meat, rather than canned or processed varieties
- Cut back on the following foods, which often have large amounts of hidden sodium:
 - Frozen and packaged foods
 - Mixed dishes, such as pizza
 - Packaged mixes
 - Canned soups or broth
 - Salad dressings
- Buy low- or reduced-sodium or no-salt-added versions of foods, when available
- Choose ready-to-eat breakfast cereals that are lower in sodium
- Limit smoked, cured, or processed beef, pork, poultry, and fish

Avoid the following foods, which are high in sodium and salt:

- Canned foods
- Frozen dinners and meals
- Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals
- Cheese
- Cured and processed meats
- Smoked fish and meats
- Many kinds of fast food
- Tomato sauce or paste
- Salted chips
- Pretzels
- Salted nuts
- Salted popcorn
- Snack mixes
- Vegetable juice
- Bacon fat
- Salt pork
- Ham hock
- Prepared salad dressings
- Canned gravies and sauces
- Dried gravy mixes
- Many condiments, such as ketchup, soy sauce, barbecue sauce, and mustard
- Some shellfish, such as shrimp

Reducing salt and sodium when cooking

The following suggestions can help you reduce the salt and sodium content in the foods that you cook yourself:

- Cook rice, pasta, and hot cereals without the salt
- Rinse canned foods, such as tuna, beans, and vegetables, to remove some of the sodium
- Use herbs, spices, and salt-free seasoning blends in cooking and at the table
- Substitute fresh garlic, onion, or celery for seasonings such as garlic salt, onion salt, and celery salt
- Make foods from scratch, rather than using prepared foods, whenever possible
- Try to use lemons and limes to season foods

Helpful tips

Remember these helpful tips:

- Choose low-sodium or salt-free foods
- Do not add salt to foods
- Learn to read food labels—look for hidden salt and sodium
- Limit alcohol intake
- Quit smoking
- Keep physically active
- Lose weight, if overweight
- Check your blood pressure frequently

References

American Dietetic Association. Nutrition fact sheet: get smart about salt. Available at: http://www.eatright.org/ada/files/Mrs_Dash.pdf. Accessed February 4, 2009.

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