

Bridge Medical / Monkseaton Medical Centre

Lifestyle changes that can lower blood pressure

Regular physical activity

If possible, aim to do some physical activity every day. How much exercise to do is given in Government guidelines below:

Adults (aged 19-64 years)

- Over a week, activity should add up to at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of moderate-intensity activity in bouts of 10 minutes or more. For example, 30 minutes on at least five days a week.
- Comparable benefits can be achieved by 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity spread across the week or combinations of moderate-intensity and vigorous-intensity activity.

Older adults (aged 65 years and older)

- Older adults who participate in any amount of physical activity gain some health benefits. Some physical activity is better than none and more physical activity provides greater health benefits.
- Older adults should aim to be active daily and, if possible, aim for the same amount of physical activity as younger adults.

If you previously did little physical activity and you change to doing regular physical activity, it can reduce your blood pressure. You should seek medical advice before undertaking strenuous exercise if you have high blood pressure.

Eat a healthy diet

- At least five portions, or ideally 7-9 portions, of a **variety** of fruit and vegetables per day.
- A third of most meals should be starch-based foods (such as cereals, wholegrain bread, potatoes, rice, pasta), plus fruit and vegetables.
- Use wholegrain versions of starchy foods (such as rice and pasta).
- Reduce fatty food such as fatty meats, cheeses, full-cream milk, fried food, butter, etc. Use low-fat, mono-unsaturated or polyunsaturated spreads.
- Include 2-3 portions of fish per week. At least one of these should be 'oily', such as herring, mackerel, sardines, kippers, pilchards, salmon, or **fresh** (not tinned) tuna.
- If you eat meat it is best to eat lean meat, or eat poultry such as chicken or turkey (without the skin which is full of saturated fat!).
- If you fry foods, choose a vegetable oil such as rapeseed or olive oil.
- Limit salt in your diet (see below).

A healthy diet provides benefits in different ways. For example, it can lower cholesterol, help control your weight, and provide plenty of vitamins, fibre and other nutrients which help to prevent certain diseases. Some aspects of a healthy diet also directly affect blood pressure. For example, if you have a poor diet and change to a diet which is low-fat, low-salt and high in fruit and vegetables, it can significantly lower blood pressure.

Have a low salt intake

The amount of salt that we eat can have a major effect on our blood pressure. Public Health England says excess salt is one of the most important risk factors for high blood pressure we can change. Government guidelines recommend that we should have no more than 5-6 grams of salt per day. On average, we eat just over 8 grams a day. About 3/4 of the salt we eat comes from processed food, where it's often not obvious - for instance, packet soups and sauces and even breakfast cereals can be high in salt. Tips on how to reduce salt include:

- Use herbs and spices rather than salt to flavour food.
- Limit the amount of salt used in cooking. Do not add salt to food at the table.
- Choose foods labelled 'no added salt'.
- Avoid processed foods as much as possible.
- Salt substitutes are available, containing a reduced amount of sodium, the chemical that increases blood pressure. However, these substitutes often contain large amounts of potassium, which may be unsuitable for older people, people with diabetes, pregnant women, people with kidney disease and people taking some antihypertensive drugs. If in doubt, check with your doctor or pharmacist.

Drink alcohol in moderation

Too much alcohol can be harmful and can lead to an increase in blood pressure. You should not drink more than the recommended amount. Currently the maximum recommended amount for men and women is no more than 14 units of alcohol per week. Units should be spread out through the week and there should be at least two alcohol-free days a week. One unit is in about half a pint of normal-strength beer, or two thirds of a small glass of wine, or one single pub measure of spirits.

Cutting back on heavy drinking improves health in various ways. It can also have a direct effect on blood pressure. For example, if you are drinking heavily, cutting back to the recommended limits can lower a blood pressure.

Stop smoking

Smoking does not directly affect the level of your blood pressure. However, smoking greatly adds to your health risk if you already have high blood pressure. You should make every effort to **stop smoking**. If you smoke and are having difficulty in stopping, see your community pharmacist for help and advice.