



# High Blood Pressure - Self Help Measures

This is a patient information fact-sheet from the **British Hypertension Society**

High blood pressure (or hypertension), rather like high blood cholesterol or cigarette smoking, is not an illness. It is a risk factor for heart attacks and stroke. **High blood pressure is very common and affects one person in seven.** Most people with hypertension need tablets to lower blood pressure, they usually need to be taken for life. However these tablets are very successful at preventing heart attacks and strokes, and they have very few side-effects.

## IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF?

**YES!** Several things that you can do may lower your blood pressure, and all are fairly easy to do. In fact none of them need cost you any extra money, and all of these changes in your everyday lifestyle will improve your overall health. **The most important self help measures** are:

- ◆ **AVOID BEING OVERWEIGHT**
- ◆ **KEEP ALCOHOL DOWN**
- ◆ **REDUCE SALT INTAKE**
- ◆ **EXERCISE REGULARLY**
- ◆ **STOP SMOKING**

### AVOID BEING OVERWEIGHT

There is a strong link between being overweight and having high blood pressure. If your weight is above normal for your height you should aim to lose the extra weight. This will help to bring your blood pressure down. You do not need to aim for a "model" figure, just to be within a healthy range for your height. If you cannot lose weight without help, your doctor may refer you to a dietician who can advise you on different ways to change your diet. You do not have to give up eating all the food you enjoy. Some people find a slimming group or club very helpful to give extra support and encouragement. **Even if you are not overweight - EAT SENSIBLY!** Try to eat a low fat, high fibre diet.

- ◆ *Try to eat* - fish, white meat (e.g. chicken - without the skin); cottage cheese, low fat yoghurt, semi-skimmed milk; aim for seven items a day of fresh fruit and vegetables - eat seasonal vegetables and fruit when you can. When fresh vegetables are expensive eat frozen ones instead. When possible grill food instead of frying it e.g. fish
- ◆ *Avoid* - butter, cheese and full fat milk; fried foods and snacks; cakes, biscuits and chocolate; fatty meat.

A diet containing plenty fruit and vegetables increases potassium intake, and this can also help to lower your blood pressure.

### KEEP ALCOHOL INTAKE DOWN

There is a strong link between a high alcohol intake and raised blood pressure. However, drinking a moderate amount is harmless unless you are trying to lose weight.

You should limit your alcohol to *no more than 21 units per week*. One unit is equal to a glass of wine; a half pint of ordinary strength beer, cider or lager; or a single measure of spirits. Try to spread your units evenly over the week and avoid big drinking sessions. A large amount of alcohol the night before may raise your blood pressure significantly the following day. Talk to your doctor if you are drinking more alcohol than recommended and find it difficult to reduce.

### REDUCE SALT INTAKE

There is very good evidence that a high salt diet affects your blood pressure. Salt can also increase the amount of fluid that you retain in your body

*How can you reduce the amount of salt you eat?*

Fresh food contains very little salt. Most of the salt we eat is in processed foods or in salt added to food while cooking or at table. Look at the labels on the food that you eat. If the label says *sodium chloride (NaCl)*, *sodium benzoate* or *monosodium glutamate* then you may be eating extra salt without noticing it.

Salt is hidden in many processed foods e.g. tinned or packet soups, breakfast cereals, bread, tinned or processed fish, crisps, nuts, hamburgers and pre-packaged meals. Some supermarkets do sell low salt bread. Salt is also found in high amounts in hard cheese, bacon, ham, sausages and corned beef. Try to eat plenty of fresh, unprocessed food and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. Salt should be used very sparingly in cooking if at all. If you feel that you cannot do without salt, you might try a salt substitute (after checking with your doctor). Rock salt and sea salt are **not** salt substitutes. It is preferable to avoid the taste of salt altogether. You will find fairly quickly that your sense of taste adjusts so that you no longer like the taste of salt.

**EXERCISE REGULARLY**

Exercise can help to reduce your blood pressure **and** keep your weight down. It is also a good stress reliever! Stress is not a cause of high blood pressure although many people believe this. If you have not done any exercise recently, check with your doctor first.

*What type of exercise should you do?*

Any vigorous activity like walking, swimming, cycling, jogging, dancing or gardening is beneficial. Exercise does not need to be too strenuous. You should start slowly and build up the amount of exercise that you do. Start by walking briskly. You do not have to jog unless you wish to. The important thing is to choose an activity which you enjoy - if you don't enjoy a particular form of exercise you will find it much harder to do it regularly. Walk the dog; use the stairs, not the lift; and keep active! Aim for 20 - 30 minutes activity at least three times a week.

*Is there any exercise which you should not do?*

For some people it is not advisable to lift very heavy weights or to do certain very strenuous activities e.g. playing squash. If you are thinking of taking up a new sport which is very strenuous, check with your doctor first.

**STOP SMOKING**

Giving up smoking will not lower your blood pressure, but it greatly reduces the risk of blood vessel damage that can lead to a heart attack or stroke. It is important that you stop smoking because you really want to, and to be clear about your reasons for stopping. Have an action plan, prepare well, and you will succeed. Your pharmacist, GP or practice nurse can advise on stopping smoking, and on aids to help you such as chewing gum and skin patches.

There are also free advice lines which you can ring for help - e.g. Quitline 0800 002200

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON OTHER ASPECTS OF HYPERTENSION CONTACT :**

The British Hypertension Society Information Service, 127 High Street, Teddington, Middlesex, TW11 SHH  
(enclose an SAE)

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