



# *Understanding* Hypertension

LEARN HOW HYPERTENSION  
HAPPENS, WHO'S AT RISK,  
AND HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR  
BLOOD PRESSURE.

# HYPERTENSION 101

*What is it?*

Nearly **half of American adults suffer from hypertension**. Also known as **high blood pressure**, hypertension increases the risk of heart issues like **stroke, heart attack, and heart disease**. Yet many people don't even realize they have it!

Dubbed "**the silent killer**," hypertension often comes without symptoms. That's why monitoring your blood pressure is crucial... and why the nurse whips out a blood pressure cuff at every doctor appointment without fail.

## What is Blood Pressure?

Blood pressure is the force your blood exerts as it presses against the walls of your arteries. Your blood pressure consists of two numbers:

- **Systolic blood pressure = the top number.** This measures the pressure against your arterial walls as you heart beats.
- **Diastolic pressure = the bottom number.** This measures the pressure exerted on the walls of your arteries between beats.

Your are at risk when your **systolic blood pressure is over 130... or your diastolic blood pressure is over 80.**

Blood pressure category	Systolic BP	and/or	Diastolic BP
Normal	Less than 120	and	Less than 80
Elevated	120 - 129	and	Less than 80
Stage 1 hypertension	130 - 139	or	80 - 89
Stage 2 hypertension	140 or higher	or	90 or higher
Hypertensive crisis (seek emergency help)	180 or higher	and/or	120 or higher

# HYPERTENSION CAUSES

## *Breaking it down*

Now that you understand what hypertension is, let's cover how it happens. Hypertension usually develops over several years -- and is **rarely due to one cause**.

Your risk of high blood pressure increases with age. That's because as you age, your arterial walls stiffen and become less flexible.

### Other hypertension risk factors include:

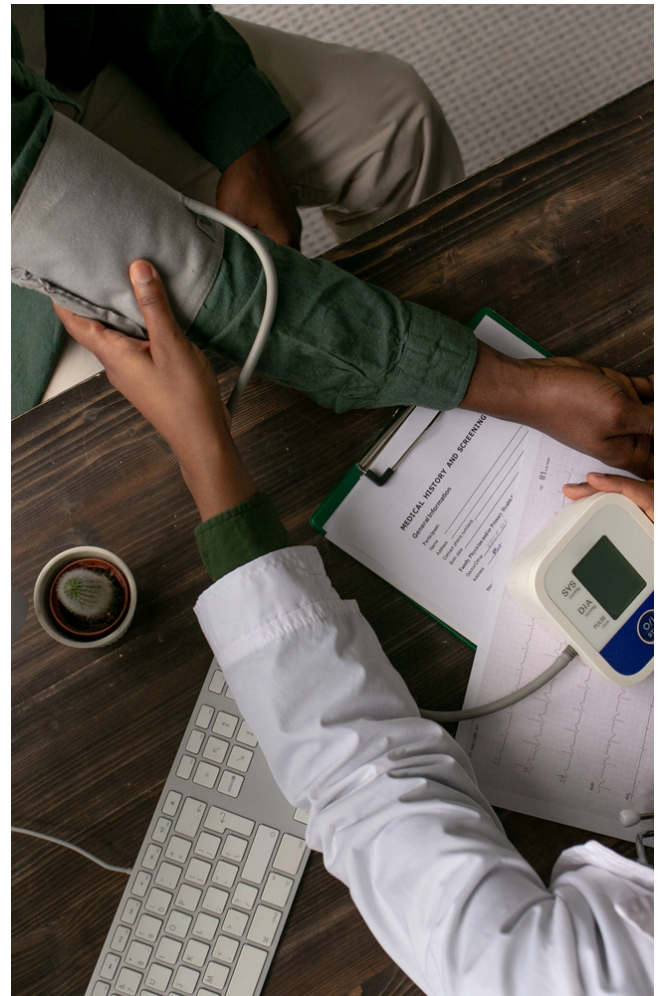
- Family history of high blood pressure
- Smoking
- Overweight or obesity
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Poor diet, especially diets high in sodium and sugar
- Diabetes
- Lack of exercise
- High stress

You can keep tabs on your blood pressure by purchasing at-home blood pressure cuff. Or visit your local pharmacy and use their free blood pressure machine.

Many smart watches, fitness trackers, and apps measure blood pressure too. But they don't always have the best accuracy.

If you discover you have high blood pressure, be sure to check in with your doctor. There are medications that lower blood pressure. But like all drugs, they come with a long list of side effects.

Luckily, you can **lower your blood pressure naturally** by making some tweaks to your **diet and lifestyle**. Read on to learn to do's & don'ts to improve your blood pressure.



# LOWERING BLOOD PRESSURE

*To salt or not to salt?*

You've probably heard that salt can increase your blood pressure. And that's true, but it's only part of the story.

Table salt is about 40% sodium. While sodium is an essential mineral, too much of it can be bad news for your heart. **Sodium draws water into your bloodstream**, which can **increase blood pressure**.

So yes, if you have high blood pressure, you DO need to limit your sodium intake. But for most people, salt isn't the top culprit... processed foods are.

Most processed, packaged, and canned foods are swimming in sodium. These include hot dogs, potato chips, canned soups, frozen dinners, etc.

You can keep your sodium in check by eating mostly whole foods (adding a touch of salt when you are cooking whole foods usually is not a problem). When you do shop for processed foods, always **check the sodium content on the nutritional label**. Look for "low sodium" or "no salt added" products.

## **The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends:**

- Everyone stay under 2,500 mg of sodium per day (about 1 tsp)
- Those with high blood pressure stay under 1,500 mg per day (about 2/3 tsp)



If you're eating a whole-foods diet, you can still use salt in your cooking! Just don't go overboard and **use mineral-rich sea salt or pink Himalayan salt over table salt**.

# LOWERING BLOOD PRESSURE

*How sugar affects it*

People tend to pin all the hypertension blame on sodium. But sugar raises your blood pressure too. Research shows its effects may be even worse than sodium!

When you eat a lot of sugar, it **deactivates nitric oxide** (NO). Nitric oxide is a vasodilator, meaning it helps your blood vessels relax. When nitric oxide gets too low, it can **narrow your blood vessels** and make them less flexible. Over time this can lead to high blood pressure.

Not to mention, **sugar increases the risk of obesity and diabetes** -- both risk factors for hypertension. Sugar also **activates your sympathetic nervous system**, (aka “fight or flight”), which increases your heart rate and blood pressure.

To lower your blood pressure, cutting back on sugar is key.

Fruit is packed with fiber and nutrients, so it's A-okay. But steer clear of foods with added sugars, especially high fructose corn syrup.



## What About Alcohol?

Because alcohol is converted into sugar, it **increases your blood pressure** too. Alcohol can even prevent blood pressure medications from working properly.

So if you have high blood pressure, it's best to limit it alcohol as much as possible.

If you *don't* have high blood pressure, cutting back on alcohol can help prevent you from developing it in the future.

# HYPERTENSION DIET TIPS

## *What to eat & avoid*

While sugar and sodium increase blood pressure, some nutrients have the opposite effect.

- **Fiber** helps lower blood pressure and cholesterol.
- **Potassium** relaxes the walls of the blood vessels, which can help lower blood pressure.
- **Magnesium** increases nitric oxide production, which can improve blood pressure.

Here's a handy cheat sheet for the **best and worst foods for hypertension:**

### Foods to Enjoy

- **High fiber foods** like fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains
- **Potassium rich foods** like bananas, avocados, salmon, potatoes, tomatoes, acorn squash, & beans
- **Magnesium rich foods** like spinach, pumpkin seeds, almonds, brown rice, & dark chocolate
- **Foods with healthy fats** such as seeds, nuts, fatty fish, olive oil, and avocado
- **Lean protein** like chicken, fish, turkey, tofu, tempeh, & beans

### Foods to Avoid/Limit

- **Sugary foods** like cookies, cake, donuts, candy, soda, pastries
- **Packaged & processed foods** like cereal, crackers, chips, hot dogs, frozen dinners, canned soups, etc.
- **High sodium foods** like cold cuts, cured meats, pizza, pickles, and canned tomato products
- **Foods high in saturated fats** like butter, whole milk, red meat, and fatty cuts of meat
- **Fast foods**, which are high in sodium and saturated fats.
- **Alcohol**



# BLOOD PRESSURE + STRESS

*What's the connection?*

Stress makes *everything* worse, including blood pressure. When you're under stress, your body releases a cascade of hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. This **speeds up your heart rate, narrows your blood vessels**, and yes... **increases your blood pressure**.

Once the stressor passes, your blood pressure goes back to its baseline. But sadly, many people today live in a state of chronic stress. That's why reducing stress is crucial if you want to improve your blood pressure.

**Here are a few ways to keep stress in check:**

- 1- **Practice relaxation techniques.** Yoga, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing exercises are all proven stress-busters. They help you shift from your sympathetic nervous system to your parasympathetic nervous system. For tons of stress relieving tools, check out the free app Insight Timer.
- 2 - **Get plenty of sleep.** Lack of sleep affects your mood, energy levels, and increases your blood pressure. Try to get at least 7-8 hours of sleep every night.
- 3 - **Stay active.** Exercise burns off stress and keeps your heart healthy. Aim for 150 minutes of physical activity every week, or about 20 minutes per day.
- 4 - **Simplify your schedule.** It's hard to relax when you're always on the go. Look at your to-do lists and calendar. Does *everything* need to be there? Schedule less time for things that aren't as important to you. And if there are things you don't want to do, it's okay to say no!
- 5 - **Strengthen your social network.** When you're stressed, it's tempting to stay cocooned. But we're social creatures built for connection. So make time for your loved ones. And if you could use more connection, consider taking a class, joining a club, or participating in a support group.