

# Blood Pressure



A guide to better health

Fact sheet 1 of 2

## What is blood pressure?

In a healthy young adult, a normal blood pressure is about 120/80 (the higher figure refers to blood pressure during each heartbeat and the lower figure to your blood pressure between beats).

However, some healthy people with a normal heart and blood vessels have a blood pressure well below the average.

Exercise, excitement, anger or anxiety all make your heart beat faster and increase your blood pressure temporarily.

## What is high blood pressure?

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is when your blood pressure is constantly at a higher level than recommended. It develops when the walls of the larger arteries lose their natural elasticity and become rigid, and the smaller blood vessels become narrower. This means your heart has to work harder to pump the blood around your body.

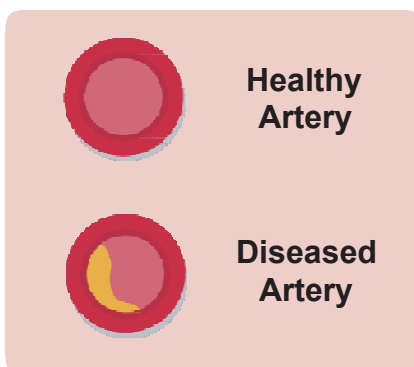
People with high blood pressure run a higher risk of having a stroke or a heart attack. If left untreated for a long time, high blood pressure can lead to kidney failure and even damage your sight. It can also make the heart abnormally large and less efficient, leading to heart failure.

## Low blood pressure?

The term hypotension (low blood pressure) is usually used only when blood pressure has fallen to the extent that blood flow to the brain is reduced, causing dizziness and fainting. Hypotension can occur on sudden movement such as sitting or standing abruptly (postural hypotension). It can occur as a result of nerve damage which disrupts the reflexes controlling blood pressure and as an adverse effect to some drugs. Hypotension can also occur as a result of serious burns or injuries that lead to a reduction in the blood volume and to shock.

## Factors that contribute to high blood pressure!

- Excessive alcohol intake
- Overweight
- Smoking
- Genetics
- Side effects of drugs
- Side effects of diseases
- Stress
- Poor diet: high salt intake
- Lack of exercise



If you have high blood pressure, reducing your blood pressure can lower your risk of having all of these problems. Generally, the target is to have a blood pressure below 140/85mmHg (140 systolic and 85 diastolic). However, your doctor will give you a target that is right for you, depending on your age and general health.



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## What can you do?

- **Watch your weight** - There are no miracle short-cuts to losing weight permanently. Cut down on fatty foods and eat more vegetables, fruit, fish and lean meats, bread, potatoes, pasta and rice.
- **Restrict salt intake** - The target should be to have less than 6 grams of salt a day. Use herbs and spices to replace salt in cooking.
- **Try to avoid situations which cause stress** - You may manage to win an argument but your blood pressure will soar.
- **Exercise regularly** - Build up to 30 minutes a day, this can be in two, 15 minute sessions (enough to get you slightly out of breath). The rate at which you use the energy (calories) in your food is called the metabolic rate. Exercise can increase the metabolic rate. This is especially important for people trying to lose weight because the body can react to a reduced energy (calorie) intake by slowing down the metabolic rate - using up less energy (calories) than before.
- **Hypertension** - This rarely causes symptoms, but the incidence does increase with age and therefore, if you are over thirty-five you should have regular blood pressure checks.
- **Stop smoking** - Smoking temporarily raises your blood pressure. Tar in inhaled smoke can narrow your arteries and carbon monoxide takes the place of oxygen in your blood stream which puts the heart under pressure.

## Websites to visit:

[www.nhs.uk/livewell](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell) - a website that provides healthy living advice for all ages, including healthy eating, fitness and smoking cessation.

[www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk) - a website for the British Heart Foundation, providing information on nutrition, physical activity and advice on smoking.

[www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk) - this is the website for The British Nutrition Foundation, an educational charity which provides impartial advice on healthy eating and nutrition for all ages.

[www.bdaweightwise.com](http://www.bdaweightwise.com) - a website designed by the British Dietetic Association to provide information on weight loss, healthy eating and physical activity.

Your heart is a muscular pump about the size of your fist which pumps blood round the body. The pressure is created by the heart's constant pumping of blood round the body and the size of the blood vessels through which it passes.

