

# High blood pressure

## What is blood pressure?

Your blood pressure is the pressure of blood in the arteries as it is being pumped around the body by your heart. In general, if the pressure is always higher than normal, you have high blood pressure (hypertension).

When the heart pumps blood it continually goes through two phases:

1. the **squeezing (systolic) phase** when your heart contracts and pumps blood to the major arteries
2. the **relaxing (diastolic) phase** when the heart is relaxed and filling with blood.

When blood pressure is recorded it is expressed as two numbers which represent the two phases of blood pressure. A blood pressure of 130/85 means the systolic blood pressure is 130 and the diastolic blood pressure is 85. A blood pressure greater than 130/80 for someone with diabetes is considered hypertension.

There are several factors that increase blood pressure. Some are fixed but you can change others.

**Fixed:** like many health-related issues, hereditary and age are important. High blood pressure often runs in families and blood pressure tends to increase with age.

**Changeable:** the major lifestyle factors that affect blood glucose also affect blood pressure – too much weight, too much stress, too little activity. Smoking, alcohol and salt also increase blood pressure and may increase the risk of complications from diabetes.

## Why worry about blood pressure?

Managing blood pressure is important in everyone, especially someone with diabetes. High blood pressure can lead to premature heart attacks, kidney failure and eye problems. These problems can also occur in people with diabetes. A person with diabetes and high blood pressure therefore has an even higher risk of these health problems occurring.

Fortunately, we now have effective measures to treat both blood pressure and blood glucose. The measures to treat blood pressure are also useful in managing diabetes. Healthy eating is important in managing both high blood pressure and blood glucose. Being overweight increases the work for both the pancreas and also for the heart and blood vessels. If the pancreas does not cope then the blood glucose rises, if the heart and blood vessels don't cope, the blood pressure rises.



## Medication and high blood pressure

Achieving and keeping a healthy weight, doing regular exercise and reducing salt and alcohol intake are the first steps to manage your high blood pressure. Your doctor may also prescribe medication to treat your high blood pressure. This is done in combination with a healthy lifestyle.

People with high blood pressure usually have no symptoms. If medication has been prescribed for you it is important to remember to take it even if you feel perfectly well.

### What can you do?

- > **Check your blood pressure regularly:** you may wish to purchase a home monitor.
- > **Take your medication:** as prescribed.
- > **Watch your weight:** Healthy eating along with regular physical activity is the best way to manage your weight. Healthy eating involves choosing a variety of foods that are low in fat, in particular, saturated fat, low in salt and high in fibre, vitamins and minerals. High fibre foods include wholegrain breads and cereals, legumes, vegetables and fruit. Limiting alcohol intake is also important in managing weight, blood pressure, blood fats and diabetes.
- > **Give up Smoking:** smoking is a dangerous habit. The chemicals in cigarettes can have very damaging effects on arteries and in combination with diabetes and high blood pressure can lead very rapidly to problems such as strokes, heart attacks or blood supply to the limbs. Call Quitline 137 848.
- > **Limit alcohol:** do not have more than 2 standard alcoholic drinks each day.
- > **Salt:** cutting back on salt can assist in reducing blood pressure. Choose low salt processed foods by comparing sodium (salt) content on food labels. Aim for products less than 400mg/100g of sodium.
- > **Exercise:** aim to include at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the week. Think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience. If you can, also enjoy some regular, vigorous activity for extra health and fitness. Remember, check with your doctor first if you have not exercised for some time.
- > **Relax:** this is easier said than done for many of us, but you can learn to relax and cope with stress. Tai chi, meditation, yoga and relaxation classes can all help. Ask your doctor or diabetes educator for advice about stress management techniques.
- > **Have regular check-ups:** people with diabetes are at special risk of blood vessel damage if they also have high blood pressure. That's why it is worth checking blood pressure regularly.



## Check your numbers

If your blood pressure is on target, keep checking and recording your numbers every 3-6 months. If your BP is off target, consider lifestyle and medication to bring it under control. Also consider getting a BP machine and check your numbers to make sure that you stay on target. Your pharmacist can advise on BP machines that are easy to use and give reliable results. Check your BP several times a week and at different times of the day (eg before breakfast, lunch, tea and bed). Build up a profile so that you and your doctor can see that the lifestyle and medication is working all day, every day.

## BP OK – what next?

Whether you have high blood pressure or not it is important to look at the other factors that may damage your arteries and increase your risk of a heart attack and stroke. Review your lifestyle - are you a smoker? Could you 'eat less, walk more'? What are your stress levels? You may be able to change your lifestyle or maybe there's a medication that could help. Talk to your doctor, work out a lifestyle and medication schedule and prevent problems before they occur.



**High blood pressure can damage your blood vessels  
Get your blood pressure check regularly**

## For more information

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