5 Ways to Lower Your Blood Pressure Without Medication

Hypertension strikes one in three American adults. Learn the top lifestyle strategies that can make a real impact on lowering your blood pressure.

About one in every three American adults has hypertension, or high blood pressure. Medication is often prescribed, but that's not the only solution. There are many lifestyle strategies that have also been shown to have an impact. For some, weight loss combined with exercise and a healthy eating plan may even reduce or eliminate the need for medication altogether.

Your doctor can help you decide whether to take a combined approach (medication plus lifestyle) or whether to try following these healthy lifestyle strategies first:

1. Increase exercise. Aerobic exercise can lower blood pressure and can also help with weight loss. It doesn't take a time-consuming workout in a gym to reap the benefits, either.
   - As few as 30 minutes of moderate exercise on most days of the week has been shown to be effective.
   - Aerobic activities such as walking, biking, swimming and water aerobics often produce the best results.
   - Before you start an exercise program, ask your doctor what type and amount of exercise is right for you.

2. Cut your salt intake. One teaspoon (2,400 mg) is the maximum recommended daily amount. Reducing this to two thirds of a teaspoon (1,500 mg) can make a big difference.
   - Check labels of food and over-the-counter medication for their sodium content.
   - Use herbs and spices instead of salt to flavor foods.
   - Avoid processed foods such as canned and frozen ready-to-eat foods, cheeses and luncheon meats.

3. Eat a healthy diet. Follow the DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) guidelines. This has been shown to lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure, even without other interventions.
   - The DASH diet is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products. It restricts intake of saturated fats, red meat and sugar.
   - The increased fiber, potassium, calcium and magnesium from these foods are all thought to play a role in reducing blood pressure.

4. Lose weight. For every two pounds of weight loss, you can lower your systolic pressure by one point and your diastolic pressure by 1.4 points.
   - Gradual weight loss of one to two pounds per week is most effective.
   - Keep a food journal to track exactly what and how much you eat.
   - Choose foods low in saturated fat, cholesterol, trans fats and refined sugar.
   - Watch your portion sizes.
   - Do not skip meals. Eating three meals a day plus snacks is essential in weight management.
   - Aim for 25 to 30 grams of fiber daily, which will fill you up and curb your hunger.

5. Limit alcohol. Drinking a lot of alcohol can raise blood pressure.
This means no more than one drink a day for women, two drinks for men. One drink is the equivalent of 12 ounces of beer, five ounces of wine or two ounces of hard liquor. You can also help yourself to relax and cope better with stress from your busy life with these techniques:

- Simplify. Try to cut out activities that eat up your time but deliver little value. Learn to say "no." Clean out your house, car and garage of things that you no longer need. Let go of relationships that complicate your life more than they add.
- Take a deep breath. Making a conscious effort to deepen and slow down your breathing can help you relax.
- Exercise. Physical activity is a natural stress-buster.
- Get plenty of sleep. Being sleep-deprived can make your problems seem bigger than they really are.

The key is to discover what works for you. Choose your strategies, take action and start enjoying the benefits. You can lower your blood pressure and help prevent other chronic diseases at the same time.

DASH to Lower Blood Pressure

What you eat has a lot to do with good blood pressure control. Find out what delicious foods to include in your diet to help combat high blood pressure.

Want to lower your blood pressure? Try the DASH eating plan, short for Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension.

If your first thought is that the DASH is bland and boring, think again. The DASH is as much about adding tasty, nutrient-rich foods as it is about limiting fats and sugars.

What the studies say

Two large studies, both supported by the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, have offered proof that DASH works.

The first study looked at the effects on blood pressure of eating a varied, wholesome diet versus the typical American diet.

- Results showed that compared to the typical American diet, blood pressure could be lowered by eating combinations of healthy foods, such as fruits, vegetables and low-fat dairy products.
- DASH eaters also ate reduced amounts of fats, red meats, sweets and sugared beverages.
- Noteworthy is that blood pressures were reduced on the DASH, even though this first study did not restrict sodium intake.

The second study then looked at the added effect of a reduced sodium intake on blood pressure as people followed either the DASH eating plan or a typical American diet.

- Results showed that reducing sodium lowered blood pressure even further for those already on the DASH eating plan. It also lowered pressures for those on the typical American diet.
- The biggest benefits were seen in people on the DASH eating plan who also lowered their sodium intake.

How the DASH works

Experts believe the DASH works for these reasons:

- By choosing fruits and vegetables, you're more likely to cut out high-sodium, processed foods.
The DASH diet is rich in calcium, potassium, fiber and magnesium. A lack of these nutrients is linked to high blood pressure.

DASH is low in saturated and trans fats, which are known to raise blood pressure.

Instead of supplements, the DASH focuses on combinations of healthy foods, which work together in your body to help lower blood pressure.

So what exactly IS the DASH eating plan? Specifically, it includes the following:

**Daily servings:**
- Seven to eight servings of grains, from mostly whole grains
- Four to five servings of vegetables
- Four to five servings of fruit
- Two to three servings of low-fat dairy foods
- No more than two servings of lean meat, poultry and fish
- Two to three servings of fats and oils

**Weekly servings:**
- Four to five servings of nuts, seeds and dry beans
- No more than five servings of sweets

**Fitting the DASH into your lifestyle**

You can work these DASH nutrient-foods into your meal plan in these ways:

**Up your vegetable intake**
- Add a variety of veggies to lunch or dinnertime salads and soups.
- Have cut-up veggies such as carrots, colored peppers, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and celery for snacks, with a low-fat yogurt dip.
- Increase vegetable portions of casseroles and stir-fries while decreasing meat portions.
- Add beans/legumes to salads, soups and casseroles.

**Go whole-grain**
- Choose whole-grain breads, cereals and pastas.
- Instead of white rice or potatoes, experiment with brown rice, quinoa, barley and bulgur.

**Go nutty**
- Sprinkle nuts into whole-grain cereal, yogurt or salads.
- Add natural peanut or almond butter to whole-grain bread with sliced banana.
- Snack on small amounts of nuts and dried fruit.

**Do it with dairy**
- Use skim or low-fat milk in smoothies with fresh fruit and 100 percent juice.
- Add skim or low-fat milk to coffee for lattes.
Choose low-fat yogurt for breakfast or snacks. Use low-fat cheese on whole-grain bread, sprinkled on salads, or topped on a baked potato with broccoli.

DASH isn’t just for people with high blood pressure. It’s an overall healthy, wholesome, high-fiber eating plan than can also help reduce cholesterol levels and aid in weight loss.

Can Exercise Keep You Mentally Sharp?

Exercise helps both body and mind.

Exercise maintains your body by keeping it fit and strong. Physical activity also helps ward off serious conditions like heart disease, diabetes and cancer. But exercise doesn’t just work wonders for your body. These effects apply to your brain, too. Physical activity sustains brain function and wards off declines in mental ability, too.

Experts say that exercise can help prevent mental decline as we age. Regular exercise may enhance memory and mood, and may improve our ability to juggle multiple mental tasks.

The aging brain
Severe memory loss or other serious mental impairments are most often caused by disease. But age-related mental declines may be the result of decreased brain activity and stimulation. Both mental and physical exercise can help keep your brain sharp.

Your brain with exercise
So how does physical activity boost brain power? It helps you:

- **Think more clearly.** Getting your heart rate up pumps blood to the brain. This helps your brain perform better. Low-impact exercises like walking may be best for “clearing your head” because muscles don’t work hard enough to use up extra oxygen and glucose.
- **Improve your memory.** Experts say that exercise brings on the growth of nerve cells in the hippo campus, the region of your brain involved in memory. Studies show that seniors who walk regularly have better memories than inactive older adults. And the more you exercise, the better your memory gets.
- **Better your ability to do complex tasks.** One study found that aerobic exercise helped people with mild cognitive problems to organize information, pay attention and multi-task better. This may be because exercise helps the body move glucose to the brain, which improves its function.
- **Possibly ward off Alzheimer’s disease.** There is growing research that suggests regular exercise is linked with a lower risk of Alzheimer’s. Brain activity has been shown to increase with physical fitness. One study found that adults who exercised three times a week had a much lower chance of getting Alzheimer’s than those who didn’t.
- **Ease depression and anxiety.** Exercise increases the level of serotonin (a chemical that affects mood) in the brain. Low levels of serotonin are linked with clinical depression. Some studies show that exercise can work just as well as medication in treating mild depression in some people.
- **Reduce stress.** Physical activity helps lower the release of cortisol in your body. Cortisol is a hormone linked with stress.
- **Help keep your blood pressure in check.** High blood pressure can harm blood vessels in your brain and reduce your brain’s oxygen supply. This damages nerve cells that are used for decision-making and memory.

Time to get moving
Check with your doctor first before starting an exercise program. Then use these tips to get moving:
Pick an activity you enjoy. Try walking, swimming or playing tennis. You'll be more likely to stick with exercising if you enjoy doing it.

Start slowly. Work your way up to at least 30 minutes of exercise most days of the week.

Get a workout buddy. Exercise can help build friendships. It may be easier to stick to a fitness schedule if you have someone counting on you to show up.

Even if you've lived an inactive lifestyle up until now, regular activity will help keep your body - and brain - in shape.

6 Ways to Fend Off Seasonal Flu

The best way to prevent seasonal flu is to get a flu shot. But there are also other important things you can do to stay healthy during flu outbreaks.

For many people, fall means the start of football season. Those shorter, cooler days also mark the start of flu season. So make fall a time to beef up your efforts to prevent the flu and other respiratory infections.

Six ways to fend off the flu

1. Get a flu shot. The flu shot is the single best way to prevent seasonal flu. The ideal time to get a flu shot is between September and November, before the start of the flu season. But even getting it later in the season can help. The flu shot may not always prevent seasonal flu, but it can make symptoms milder and help reduce the risk of serious complications.

The flu shot is recommended for children and teens from 6 months to 19 years of age and for adults age 50 or older. Many others with certain health problems, jobs or risk factors should also get the flu shot. To be protected, you need to get the shot every year. Talk to your doctor to find out if the flu shot is a good idea for you. If you are not able to get a flu shot, the following tips are even more important.

2. Wash your hands often. Handwashing is a simple but powerful way to prevent many types of infection, including the flu. Use soap (any type will do) and warm water. Scrub for 15 to 20 seconds. Rinse well, and dry with a clean towel or paper towel. If you don't have access to soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand wipe or gel sanitizer.

3. Keep your hands away from your face. Flu germs can live for hours on surfaces such as doorknobs and desks. They can enter your body if you touch a contaminated surface and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

4. Steer clear of sick people. Try to avoid close contact with people who are sick. If possible, stay out of crowds when flu outbreaks are highest in your area.

5. Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Use a tissue and then throw it away. If you don't have a tissue, use your hand. Then wash your hands to get rid of the germs.

6. Build your defenses. Keep your immune system strong by eating a healthy diet, getting plenty of sleep and getting regular exercise. Always talk to your doctor before you increase your activity level.
If you get the flu
Sometimes even the best prevention fails. If you do get the flu, stay home until you’re well. This can help keep the flu from spreading.

If you can't afford to be sick, talk to your doctor about taking an antiviral medicine. Antiviral medicine can often shorten the severity and duration of the flu. But it works best if you start taking it within the first two days after flu symptoms start. Symptoms of flu can include fever, headache, tiredness, sore throat, dry cough, nasal congestion and body aches.